

The Red Poppy File

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The other man, known in various corners of the world as Nick Carter, N3, and Killmaster, knew what his final briefing would be even as the words came . . .

"We all have to do things we detest. When you find those four men . . . kill them!"

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NICK CARTER

A Killmaster Spy Chiller

ISTANBUL

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with eye holes. Nick crinkled the sleek material in his fingers. "Are we going to hold up a bank, sir?"

"Forget the cracks. Just listen. This is the most important—the *really* important—part of Mission Pilgrim. When you leave this office you will go to the Mayflower Hotel. Suite 14A. The door will be open. The suite will be dark. You are *not* to turn on any lights! Understand? No lights!"

Nick nodded. "No lights."

"Right. You will go into the suite and close and lock the door. You will sit down in a chair that will be near the door. You will then put on the mask! The other man will be wearing one, too."

Nick leaned to flick ash from his cigarette. "The other man?"

"Yes." Hawk leaned back and put his feet on the desk. He ran a thin hand through his gray thatch. "There will be a man in the bedroom. The door will be open a crack, just enough so you can hear each other. You will identify yourself to this man as N3! Only as N3—nothing else. That clear?"

"Clear."

"Okay. The man in the bedroom will tell you what this mission is really all about—the part you weren't briefed on! You are to follow this man's orders absolutely! He does not know who you are—except as N3. And you are not to know who he is! This is most important. He will be using an electronic device, sort of an artificial larynx, so you can't recognize his voice. Don't try. In this case it's better if you don't know. That's it. Any questions?"

Nick Carter looked at the black mask, fingering it. "It's all quite clear, sir. But one question—isn't all this cloak and dagger just a little *much*—I mean even for us!"

For a long moment Hawk regarded his Number One boy in silence. "No," he said grimly. "It isn't! Not even for us—not in the circumstances! Now take off. After you've finished and cleared all details you can have a week's leave. Your travel orders have been cut?"

Nick said they had. "I fly to Suez and pick up a tramp steamer. *Routing* has the pleasant idea that I might make a good oiler. When I get into Istanbul—"

Hawk raised an interrupting hand. "All right! Take off.

son. That man in the bedroom doesn't wait for *anyone!*"

Even Nick Carter, vastly experienced in such matters, was impressed as he crossed the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel. He couldn't spot all of them, but he knew they were around. His professional senses warned that the place was under a security watch of the tightest kind!

The thick pile of the corridor whispered beneath Nick's feet as he strode down the long, quiet length to Suite 14 A. The door was unlocked. Nick entered, locked the door, and found the chair. The windows had been heavily draped. Nick took the black mask from his pocket. The only sound was the sibilance of the mask as he slipped it on.

The man in the bedroom must have been waiting for that sound. He said: "N3?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will be as brief as possible," the man in the bedroom said. "You may interrupt if there is anything you don't understand. Otherwise not. You may smoke if you like." The man chuckled. "I am. And I smoke cigars. I'm afraid the maid is going to find quite a mess on the carpet."

Nick Carter, trained to really listen, to catch every detail and nuance, noted the homey touch. The brief concern for a domestic's toil. He filed it away. Don't try to guess, Hawk had instructed!

The man in the bedroom said: "In your briefing you were given the names of four men—a Dr. Joseph Six; Maurice Defarge; Carlos Gonzalez; and Johnny Ruthless. Is that correct?"

Nick said it was.

"Very well." The cigar glowed again. "The last name—Johnny Ruthless—is a pseudonym. What you people call an alias, I believe. We do not know his real name."

The cigar glowed and faded. Nick thought he heard a faint sigh. Then: "You know of SMERSH, of course?"

"The Commie murder organization, sir?"

"Yes. Well, the four men I have just named are a sort of private SMERSH. A kind of Murder, Inc., for the largest dope syndicate in the world. They're very high in the syndicate; but they are not top people. They handle the killing, when killing is necessary. We don't know if they do the actual killing themselves. They have many

ways and they are most efficient. So far we haven't been able to touch them. Neither have the Turkish police, though our people and the Turks work closely together—"

"May I ask a question, sir? Just to clear up a point?"

"Of course."

Nick found the mask adhering to his lips. He pulled it away so he could speak clearly. "These four men, sir—are they all in Turkey now? At the moment? Do they operate from permanent bases in Turkey?"

"Three of them do. Dr. Six, Defarge, and Gonzalez. The one called Johnny Ruthless did, but he has dropped out of sight in recent weeks. He may be dead." Nick heard the faint chuckle again. The cigar bloomed red in the murk. "We can hope," said the man. "Any more questions?"

"No, sir. Not just now."

"Fine. I have a rather pressing appointment. As I say—neither our men nor the Turkish police have been able to get anything on these people. It's a damnable situation—because they've killed four of our men in the past six months!"

The voice in the bedroom hardened. "Four good men! All of them U.S. Narcotic agents working with the Turkish police. You will get all the details on *that*, of course, when you arrive in Turkey."

Finally: "To make you understand this, N3, I've got to get away from the immediate point for a moment. Try to bear with me. But there is more to this than just fighting the dope racket. What I'm going to ask you to do on this mission reflects a basic change in the policy of the American government! We are now going to fight fire with fire! Our enemies—and you know who they are—play rough! No holds barred. So do we, from now on. And dope is, and has been, and will be, used by our enemies as a weapon!

"We're out to destroy that weapon, N3, by striking at the source of supply! This mission is just the first—a trial balloon, you might say. Do you begin to understand?"

Nick said he did.

"About the Turkish police," said the man in the bedroom. "You will have to be very careful there. They are well disposed toward us, but their organization is a little

primitive by our standards. And *they* do not have a dope problem. On the other hand they *do* share a mutual enemy with us—an enemy who is quite literally looking down their throat! But in the end you'll have to do it yourself!"

Nick took the liberty. "Do exactly what, sir?"

"Ah, yes. You're wondering why I don't get to the nub of things. But I will—I will. Those four men we were discussing—we want them out of the way! If we can do that we hope to throw the syndicate into chaos. The big shots may even panic and try to take over security and so betray themselves. We can hope so. But our real purpose in Mission Pilgrim is to serve notice that things have changed—that the gloves are off."

Nick watched as the cigar was crushed out on the expensive Mayflower carpet. The man in there didn't bother with ashtrays.

"Before I finish, N3, I must tell you that you are not bound to accept this assignment. You have been put forward as the best man for the job—I was told that you are the best in the world at your work! That is a high compliment for any man in any line of work!"

"I doubt that I will ever receive such *kudos*, even from posterity. But to get back—your references are impeccable! From a very high source."

Nick grinned in the dark. He knew the source.

"I'll take on the job, sir," Nick said softly. "Just tell me what it is."

"Very well. I want you to go to Turkey, N3, and find those four men. Dr. Joseph Six; Maurice Defarge; Carlos Gonzalez; and the one who calls himself Johnny Ruthless. You will have all the resources of this country behind you, as well as those of your own service. And only three people in the world will know your real purpose, your real orders! Yourself, your chief—and me!"

The pause this time was long. Finally the man in the bedroom said, "We all have to do things we detest. When you find those men, N3, show them no mercy. Kill them!"

Chapter 2

NOT ALL GOODBYES ARE SAD

Janet Leeds had been insatiable all week. Even Nick's desire and ability had begun to flag. He seemed not able to give her enough—even when it was over for the time being she clung to him like a delectable soft fleshed leech, crying and sobbing and begging him to begin again.

Nick knew the why of all this. They both knew. Nick was going to leave her!

It was the end of the first week in May. It had been a sparkling champagne week; the weather had been perfect, the surf marvelous. Sun, sand, and crisp air had turned Nick's magnificent body to a high pitch of readiness. He doubled his daily stint of yoga—doing this and a little target practice with Wilhelmina, the 9mm Luger—while Janet went shopping in the village twenty miles away. Nick did not really need the target practice, but it took his mind off what was coming. The goodbye scene with Janet!

He had played these scenes many times in the past. Nick had an advantage, of course, because his own heart was never involved. His heart, to paraphrase the song, belonged to AXE!

The sun was a flaming red ball sinking into piney woods as Nick came out of the beach house to wait for Janet. She had taken the beach wagon into the village to get steaks for their last dinner.

Nick glanced in either direction along the smooth curving beach, saw no sign of the returning beach wagon and ran out to plunge into the low quartering surf. At the moment he was as superbly content and at home as a seal. Of the task upcoming he did not think at all—he had four men to kill, yes, but that was in the future.

He was wearing only the special jock in which there

was a place for Hugo, the meanest little stiletto in the world. Pierre, the gas pellet, and Wilhelmina the Luger were in a concealed compartment in Nick's new car.

Nick went out half a mile with his tireless crawl, then floated on his back and gazed at the serene twilight sky. This was beautiful country, he thought. Perfect for lovers. Not a neighbor for miles. Janet and he had been bathing nude all week, with no interruption.

Yes, Nick admitted now, it had been a good week. But it was nearly over. Almost time to go to work. An old World War I tune began to run through his head and Nick deftly altered it, humming to himself: *When it's poppy blossom time in Turkey I'll be there—*

Fragments of his last briefing flitted through his mind. When the opium poppies had been harvested and the pods cut, then the real skullduggery began. The farmers were obliged by Turkish law to sell all the opium to the government—only they didn't! They held back as much as they could and sold it on the black market—meaning the Syndicate! The Syndicate in turn ran it across the border into Syria and processed it into heroin. Then it spread all over the world and, eventually, into the veins of addicts.

A hell raid, Hawk had said. Smash as many opium caravans as you can. Put the fear of God—or of Allah—into them! He would put the fear into them, all right. They had given him a new weapon for that!

But the hell raid was secondary. Number one was—find four men and kill them! The names whipped through Nick's mind as though on tape: Dr. Joseph Six—Maurice Defarge—Carlos González—Johnny Ruthless. The last name intrigued Nick the most. Ruthless! An alias for whom? Somehow—he had no real reason why—he thought that he would probably kill Johnny Ruthless last.

Nick rolled over, glanced at the special AXE watch on his wrist—water and bullet proof—and sounded like a whale lonely for the depths. Might as well test his lungs, exercise them a little.

He went down and down in a deep probing dive, found sandy bottom. He stooged around on the bottom until his lungs began to pain, then shot to the surface. He glanced at the watch. Three minutes on the nose. He

could do almost four if he had to. It was what yoga and constant breathing exercises did for you.

Nick saw the beach wagon coming along the sand from the north. Janet at last. He began to swim in, taking it as fast as he could this time, gliding with furious speed.

Janet Leeds was waiting beside the beach wagon, smoking a cigarette, when Nick dashed up the beach. She tossed her cigarette into the sand and raised her small, triangular face for a kiss. "Hi, darling. Miss me?"

Nick kissed her. She clung to him. "Did you? Miss me?"

"Sure did," Nick lied cheerfully. He picked her up and held her over his head, one hand on her spine just above the taut little buttocks.

"I was going to drown myself," he told her. "I thought you weren't coming back. I thought maybe you had run away with the butcher in the village. I swam way out—and I was just going down for the last time to end it all when I saw you coming back. So I came back."

Janet squealed. "Put me down, you fool! And liar!"

Nick put her down. He regarded her with mock hurt. "Liar? Is that a way to talk to a man who was just about to kill himself over you!"

"You aren't a fool," she murmured. "I know that. But you *are* a liar! You didn't miss me a bit."

"But I did," Nick insisted.

Janet put her little hands into his chest hair and tugged hard. "Liar—liar and ingrate!"

"Ouch! That hurts. Lay off!"

"Not until you admit you're a liar."

"Okay—okay! I'm a liar. Where *are* the steaks, anyway?"

"In the wagon, stupid! With all the other things." Janet turned away and began to run up to the beach house. Nick had seen a glint of moisture in her eyes. He sighed inwardly. It looked as though he would have to be cruel after all.

He gazed after her. What a perfect little doll she was! Everything about her was tiny and tight and perfect. Small hard breasts, a waist he could nearly span with one hand, little taut fanny, surprisingly long and slim legs. Hair of dark gold, spun fine. Eyes huge and gray with corneas of

a startling white. Eyes that could laugh and love—and now cry.

Nick sighed again. Then he scooped bags and parcels from the beach wagon and trudged up the slope after her.

Janet was at the bar mixing martinis when Nick entered the spacious beach house. Nick lugged the groceries into the kitchen. She won't, he thought as he stored things away, have much trouble finding a new man. Someone to marry. That's what she really wants.

When he joined her Janet was perched on a bar stool smoking a cigarette and staring into the fast pervading gloom. When Nick moved to turn on the lights she said: "No! Leave them off, honey. Suits my mood right now. But you might start the fire—please?"

Here we go, Nick thought as he touched a match to the already laid kindling and logs in the great fieldstone fireplace. A farewell scene played to martinis and fire-light.

He went to sit beside her. Still wearing only the jock. Janet swiveled on her stool and looked him up and down. "You know something, you bastard? You look like a Greek god! Anyone ever tell you that before?"

Nick straddled the stool beside her. "Well, yes—there was a little Greek girl back around 360 B.C. who said—"

"Nick! Please don't! Not tonight."

Janet's face was a pale heart shaped blur in the gloom. Her voice quavered. "Let's be serious this last time together. Serious—and completely honest." She gulped her martini.

"You'd better slow down," he warned, "or you'll be completely passed out."

"I don't give a damn, darling! You don't either, not really." She finished her drink and reached for the shining frosted pitcher of martinis. "Do you?"

Nick told her the exact truth. "Of course I give a damn. I don't want you sodden. I like you, Janet. We've had a hell of a good time together and—"

She didn't let him finish. "But don't get sloppy when it's over?"

Janet filled her glass again. "Okay—I won't. But I'll get drunk. *That* all right?"

"Up to you," said Nick. "Maybe I'll get a little drunk

with you." He tasted his martini. Just right. Cold and very dry. Janet was a good bartender.

"You? You drunk? That I would like to see. You drink gallons and you're always as sober as a judge. You drink the way you do everything else—perfectly!"

She half turned away from him, drinking, a cigarette smouldering between her fingers. Logs were catching in the fireplace now, popping and cracking and casting little whorls of roseate flame. After a long silence Janet said, so softly that Nick could barely hear: "They are not long, the days of wine and roses..."

"I always liked that one," Nick said. He spoke as softly as she had. "Ernest Dowson, isn't it?"

To his surprise Janet laughed. "You see what I mean, Nicholas boy! You even know poetry. You're perfect! Maybe that's why I want you so much. A perfect man is hard to find these days."

Nick sipped his martini. Coldly and without rancor he said, "Drink your goddamned drink and get blistered if you want to! Only don't get maudlin. I can't stand maudlin women."

Janet put her head down on the bar and began to weep softly. Nick regarded her dispassionately.

Without looking up, without ceasing to cry, Janet said: "You are going to leave me, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You aren't coming back, are you?"

"No."

She sat bolt upright. She finished the last of her drink. She wiped at her eyes with the back of one hand. She turned to him in the fire-splattered gloom and he felt the burn of her flesh on his. Her hand reached for him.

"So that is that," she said. "And damn you, Nick Carter. But before you leave you're going to give me something to remember you by! Tonight I want you to do everything to me. Don't hold off the way you do to keep from hurting me! You do hurt me, you know. I'm too little and you're too damn big, but tonight forget it. Promise?"

Nick told her that he promised. It was, oddly enough, in that moment that he felt a fleeting tenderness for her. It surprised and somewhat dismayed him. Tenderness was a dangerous emotion. It brought your guard down.

In one corner of the large room was a rattan couch covered with soft cushions. Nick picked Janet up and carried her to it. She crooked an arm behind her to unsnap her halter. Her little breasts, like soft pale fruits with sugar candy tips, pressed into Nick's face as he put her gently down on the couch. Her little hands, strong as talons, reached for the single sketchy jock he wore and tugged it down his legs. Nick stepped out of the strap and immediately her hands were avid for his body, demanding, caressing, pinching, stroking.

Janet deftly arranged herself on the couch, her sepia and white limbs glimmering in the firelight. She studied Nick's readiness and her red little mouth rounded into an O of delight and anticipation. She stroked her breasts once with her fingertips and then let the motion segue into one of outthrown arms of invitation.

"Come to me, darling. Quickly now! Love me—Nick. Love me!"

Nick Carter let his senses slough over with the stuff of ecstacy and oblivion. This was a fact of life—not of Death, and for the moment he was safe. This place was safe. This woman was his for the taking.

"No mercy," she begged. "Show me no mercy!"

There was a large window just over the couch. Nick glanced out just before he entered the woman. There was a pale crescent of moon hanging low on the horizon and, by some accident of conjunction—a single star nestled in the horns of the moon. Crescent and star! For a flash of an instant Nick thought of blood red poppies—this time next week he would be in Turkey and the killing would have begun.

Nick surged into the beckoning red target with the brutality she had begged of him. Janet screamed in pleasure and pain. Neither then nor later did Nick show her any quarter.

Chapter 3

MAN OVERBOARD

The *SS Bannockburn* was making heavy weather of it through the Sea of Marmara. It was not that the weather was bad—there was a gentle swell running—but that the *Bannockburn* was so old. Moreover she was without cargo and carrying insufficient ballast, which had been badly stowed. So the old girl was down by the bow, digging her prow into every wave, rising and shaking the spray off herself like a bedraggled old hen. She was an ancient rustpot with a paintless superstructure and sprung plates and tubercular pumps that barely kept her afloat. Yet there was a certain pathetic dignity about her. She was going home to die.

The Second Engineer was explaining this to Norris, the new oiler who had come aboard at Suez. They had left the reeking engine room to catch a breath of clean sea air and enjoy a smoke abaft the old fashioned high bridge.

The Second was normally a dour man, not much given to chat. But he had an itch of curiosity about the new oiler. Norris, Thomas J.!

Nay, thought the Second. That will never be his true name. And he was never an oiler before, though he had been quick enough to pick it up.

There was the matter of the owners, too. Those squeak-pennies hiring an extra man? Knowing the skeleton crew could cope well enough to get the old lady to the bone yard! Nay—not that crowd! Yet here the man was, shipped aboard at Suez, and as silent a man as the Second had ever seen.

He was dying to ask questions, was the Second, but something about the big man said 'twould not be canny!

It was not so much the size of him, thought the

Second. He had seen bigger men. Nor the sleek tremendous muscle of him—the Second had seen bigger muscles. Nay—it would be more the eyes of him! Sometimes in the red shadows of the engine room they glinted as hard as ball bearings.

The Second flipped his butt to leeward. "Aye," he went on, "'tis the old girl's last trip. We'll be picking up the jute in Stamboul and then on to Clydeside. She was built there. Now she'll be junked there. A bit sad, ye'll ken."

The oiler flicked his butt over the side. "How long until we're in the Horn?" His tone was flat, unaccented. This also puzzled the Second. You couldn't place the man! His voice spoke of everywhere—and nowhere.

The Second stepped into a fan of light from a port in the deckhousing and consulted a fat gold pocket watch. "Two, three hours noo and we'll be tying up."

He glanced at the oiler's face, smeared with grease, handsome and inscrutable in the poor light. "Ye'll no be expecting shore leave, lad? Not this trip. It's in and out we'll be."

The oiler nodded. "No. I wasn't expecting shore leave. Just wondering when we got in."

"Weel, now ye know. So let's get back to it, laddie." He took a deep breath and glanced at the few lights now visible on either shore. The ship would be leaving the Sea of Marmara soon and entering the Bosphorus.

"A peety we'll have no time," said the Second. "Stamboul's a fair port to quench a man's thirst."

It was an hour short of dawn when the oiler came on deck again. The ancient ship was quieter now, her plates cased as she glided with engines half down around the tip of Seraglio Point. Before her lay the Golden Horn!

The oiler cast a glance over the rail and thought: *Baby—it's going to be cold down there!*

The oiler went as silently as a ghost to the stern. There was a silvery glint in his hand. The movement itself was quicksilver as he slashed at the lashings on Number 8 lifeboat. "Sorry, Hugo," the oiler murmured as he put the little blade away. "Not your usual work, I know. But we've all got to do things we don't like at times."

The words reminded him of the words of another man. A man who sat in a darkened bedroom and talked.

From the lifeboat the oiler lifted a huge suitcase of the Gladstone type. He replaced the lashings on the lifeboat, then went stealthily around the taffrail to starboard. There, in the shadow of Number 4 lifeboat, he waited. It shouldn't be long now.

While he waited patiently the oiler's eyes roved. And his memories. It was not his first time in Istanbul. He had been here before on business.

He stood motionless, mingling with the shadows, a shadow himself as his eyes remembered the harbor. He could sense, rather than see, the clutter of shipping, the docks and derricks and cranes, the warehouses and piers. From the city rising roundabout on the hills there was the thrust and loom of dozens of minarets and mosques. Soon now the *muezzin* would be calling the Faithful to the first prayer of the day. *Allah akbar*. God is great! There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet!

Istanbul! Stamboul, to the English tongue. Old Constantinople in song and history book. Ravished and reborn a hundred times. A squalid, teeming, dynamic nexus between Europe and Asia. A natural magnet for intrigue and for the inevitable concomitant of intrigue—Death!

The oiler peered to starboard. There across the oily waters of the Horn lay Beyoglu. He smiled to himself and for a moment the harsh planes of his face were gentle. She had been a white Russian. Her name was Jali. And she could have given lessons to the *hour*i. She had known how to make a man happy, that one. Without clinging.

The oiler sighed and glanced at his wrist watch. He did not like to think about Jali. He had failed her. One of those unaccountable slips that every agent made now and then. Only he had not had to pay the tab. Jail had paid it. They had decoyed him away and cut her throat!

The oiler shifted his feet. He stared into the mist. The signal should come from somewhere between the Maritime Station and the Musretiye Mosque. If all had gone well. If there had been no slips—if! A big word in his profession!

There it was now! A bright little eye winking in the misty dark. *Di da—da di di da—dit—AXE!*

The oiler took a pen flash out of his pocket and flashed an answer back across the misty Horn. *AXE!*

Once more the blinker came back. *AXE!*

"Evet," said the oiler, speaking to himself in Turkish. Might as well get in the mood of things. Yes. This was it.

He picked up the suitcase and went over the side feet first. As he went over the rail he patted it. "So long, old girl. Good luck!"

There was nothing golden about the waters of the Golden Horn. They were as cold as he had expected, and as stinking with oil and garbage and other harbor debris. He surfaced and swam away from the *Bannockburn*.

He made a hundred yards and stopped to tread water. The *Bannockburn* kept steadily on her slow course for the Galata Bridge. Her stern lights faded into the mist. Now and then he held the pen flash over his head and flashed—*AXE!*

Five minutes passed before he heard the sound of oars to his left. He flashed the signal again. A reply blinked back at him. A moment later a voice, made eerie by mist and water, floated to him. "N3?"

The man in the water recognized the voice. Charles "Mousy" Morgan. It was okay. He answered softly. "N3 here. Get me out of this soup. It's colder than a brass monkey!"

A pale face, made owl-like by horn rimmed glasses, peered down at him. "Welcome to our harbor, N3. Refer all complaints to Ankara, please. This is a hell of a time to go swimming anyway, if you ask me!"

Nick grabbed the gunwale and swung himself into the little boat. Mousy Morgan said, "Easy, pal! This ain't much of a boat, but it's all we got." He looked at Nick's suitcase dripping in the bottom of the boat. "Dunking isn't going to do *that* much good!"

Nick was squeezing water out of his pants. "Won't hurt it," he said. "Specially waterproofed for this job. Wish I was!" Nick leaned close to Mousy and nodded toward the big man who was rowing. "Who's our pal?" Nick was not especially pleased to find that Mousy had company. He had expected the little agent to be alone.

The bulky man wearing a raincoat and a snapbrim hat,

and handling the oars, answered for himself: "Jim Todhunter, sir, Narcotics."

Nick gave the man a curt nod.

Mousy Morgan said, "It's okay, N3. I couldn't handle this damned tub myself. Anyway he's doing all the work." Mousy chuckled and added, "And he stole the boat!"

Nick sniffed. "Not much doubt where he stole it, either."

Mousy chuckled again. "Yeah. I know. Horn fishermen don't worry much about cleaning their boats."

"All right," Nick commanded. "Let's get the hell out of here before we have harbor patrol trouble. It'll be light soon."

Todhunter put his broad back into the rowing. Nick sat in the stern sheets the Gladstone bag at his feet, and regarded Mousy sitting on the thwart facing him. This little character hasn't changed much, Nick thought with a touch of affection. Brash and big-mouthed as always. Compensation for lack of size. Mousy came by his nickname legitimately. Mousy was superbly unnoticeable. Non-descript. And an extremely valuable agent! No one ever really *saw* Mousy—until it was too late. Mousy could never have made it through PURG, the section of Hell that AXE used for training and conditioning its agents, but special dispensation was made in his case. Mousy wasn't meant for the rough jobs. His speciality was creeping in and out of tiny holes where no one else could go!

Mousy leaned toward Nick and whispered so the man rowing could not hear. "I'm glad they sent you, Nick. I guess they really mean business this time. About time, too! But we're okay now—if anybody can put those bastards behind bars you can!"

For years now Mousy Morgan had had a galloping case of hero worship for Nick Carter. Nick tolerated it because he knew the little man was sincere.

Nick was feeling a little better about Jim Todhunter's presence. Todhunter would know him only as N3. And to all of them—the AXE men, the Narcotics people, the Turkish cops, he would appear to be on a routine mission. Object to apprehend the ring-leaders of the Syndicate.

It might be different, of course, when the corpses start-

ed turning up! He would worry about that when the time came. Meantime only Hawk and the man in the bedroom knew his real mission. Even Mousy Morgan did not know that Nick held the rank of KILLMASTER, with a license to kill at discretion!

So Nick whispered back to Mousy, "What's the setup now? You people making any progress?"

Mousy leaned closer. "I think we've finally gotten a break! We found a girl—or rather the Turkish cops found her and turned her over to us. She's a cured addict! Her name is Mija Gialellis. A Greek-Turk girl. She hates those dope pushing bastards worse than we do. The Turkish cops turned her over to Todhunter and I wangled her from him—I've got her on ice at the station! She's a beautiful kid. Smart, too! There's only one thing—" Mousy tended to squeak a little when he got excited—"she's practically a dead woman—unless we're very careful! The people we're after know she's cured—know she's a danger to them, too. They'll kill her if they can."

"Then we'll keep her alive," Nick said grimly. "At least until the job—"

Todhunter stopped rowing and sat in a listening attitude. The dawn was coming fast now and the mist was thinning, though still heavy in spots. Todhunter took a heavy Colt .45 from his shoulder clip and laid it on the thwart beside him.

Mousy said: "He's been hearing things all night. Thinks someone is dogging us."

Nick held up a hand for silence. "What about it, Todhunter?"

"Unless my ears have been playing tricks," Todhunter said, "we *are* being dogged. I keep hearing a motor. First I hear it, then I don't. Like they were gunning it for awhile, then turning off and coasting. It's been too dark for them to see us—until right now!"

But Nick said, "I haven't heard anything."

"They've been lying doggo," Todhunter said. "But I'll swear I heard an engine a minute ago!"

Nick admitted the possibility. He and Mousy had been intent on their own conversation.

"Could be the harbor patrol," said Mousy.

"That would be almost as bad as the other creeps," the

Narcotics man said sourly. "They'd ask a million questions."

Nick said: "Keep rowing, Todhunter! How far are we from where we're going?"

"Three—four hundred yards from the jetty we want. Or were. The current is taking us out again."

"Row then! As quietly as you can. No more talking."

Nick bent to fumble with the straps and buckles of the Gladstone bag. From it now he took a small object. It was the size and shape of a lemon. It was the new weapon, as yet untried in the field, that had been given him by Editing and Special Effects just before he left Washington. Old man Poindexter, chief of Special Effects, had advised Nick to be extremely careful with the new weapon. It was, quite literally, murder!

Mousy Morgan stared at the little object, started to say something, then closed his mouth. Nick slipped the deadly lemon into his pocket.

Nick closed and locked the Gladstone and waited. The Luger was taped to his leg. Pierre, the gas pellet, was in armpit. Hugo the stiletto was snug in a sheath on k's arm. None of them would be much help if trouble now. No more than Todhunter's Colt. But the little might!

The big Owens cruiser had been hiding in a patch of mist near the jetty. Waiting like a sleek cat for the mouse to venture within pouncing range!

It pounced now with a roar of powerful engines. The cruiser came slashing out of the drifting mist, headed straight for them.

Todhunter swore, dropped the oars and reached for his Colt. Mousy sat for a split instant of petrified fear and inaction.

Nick Carter analyzed the situation and reacted with the speed of a striking snake. The gunner on the flying bridge! A lone man with a submachine gun bulky in his hands, steadying it on the rail, drawing a bead on the three men in the little rowboat. This was more than just a hit and run attempt. These killers were out to make sure!

Nick yelled. "Overboard! Go deep and stay down!" He kicked the suitcase at Mousy. "Take care of that! Todhunter—"

Too late! The Narcotics man was on his feet, the Colt heavy and black in his hand. The pistol boomed hollowly in the morning air. The machine gunner, dark silhouette against gray dawn, took careful aim and loosed a burst.

"Damn fool!" Nick lunged across the thwarts, trying to get to the Narcotics man and shove him over. Mousy slid over the side, lugging the big suitcase with him.

Pieces of boat were flying around Nick. Todhunter went to one knee, his face twisted, still firing as the big cruiser smashed toward them. The gunner let go another burst. Nick had to hug the bottom or he would have been torn apart. Lead whispered over his head.

Nick watched the slugs stitch little red holes in Todhunter's thick body. Still the man fired back, the Colt heavy in his hand now.

Todhunter made one last agonized effort to fire again. The gunner ripped off another clip and Todhunter's face flew apart like a burst tomato!

The cruiser sliced through the rowboat. Nick went over the side. In the same motion he tossed the lemon shaped bomb into the after cockpit of the Owens.

Nick went deep. Deeper! He hoped Mousy was doing the same. Tiny Tim, as the new grenade was called, was having its first field test. As he went deeper and deeper Nick found himself hoping, fervently, that he would be around to make a report on it.

N3 heard nothing. He *felt* it. A giant hand plunged into the Golden Horn, probing and stirring the greasy waters into lashing fury. Nick was tossed and battered and spun and then the downward pressure came and he was thrust so deep his face rammed mud. Suddenly the cork was drawn and he was pulled upward with a terrible strength, finally hurled out of the water like a leaping fish!

Nick floated in a daze. His head was splitting, his ears rang and he was half blind.

He was treading water in the midst of carnage. In a slowly widening wheel of total destruction. Part of a body floated past. No head, but the torso was too husky to be Mousy.

Nick pushed his way through the flotsam, searching. No Mousy Morgan.

He couldn't spend forever looking. He had to get the

hell out of there. If Mousy was dead, and he probably was, then he had died in the line of duty. There was still the mission. It would be a hell of a lot tougher without Mousy. Nick didn't even know where the station was in Stamboul—no AXE agent was ever told more than he had to know to do his job—and there was the girl Mousy had mentioned. He would have to find her. Nick started to swim in the direction of the jetty. First thing was to get out of the Horn and lose himself!

"Nick!—help! Help me—"

Nick swirled in the water, searching. That had been Mousy's voice. But where, damn it? Time was running out. The sun would be popping over the minarets any minute now. And the harbor patrol would be along!

"Nick! Over h—here!"

Nick zeroed in on the sound. "Keep talking," he yelled. "I'm coming."

He found the little man still clinging to the suitcase. He collared Mousy and started for the jetty, swimming hard.

Mousy Morgan was beaten and battered and nearly half-dead, but he retained his spirits. "What," he gasped as Nick towed him along, "what in God's name was that? An atom bomb?"

Nick grunted. "You guessed it, little man. Half a grain of sand of fissionable matter! Tiny Tim! Now shut up and don't lose that suitcase or I'll lose you!"

"The ball," Mousy said weakly, "sure has opened with a bang!"

Nick couldn't have agreed more.

Chapter 4

A PLACE OF SKULLS

Nick was feeling the beginnings of exhaustion when he pulled Mousy and the suitcase onto a low stone jetty. Shallow stairs, worn and grooved by centuries, led up to a narrow bricked street where a crowd was beginning to form.

Nick grabbed the little man by the elbow and hustled him up the stairs. "We've got to get the hell out of here before the cops show. Where's the car?"

"Couple of streets over. In an alley. A black Opel. It's my own, not an AXE job."

"It's a car," Nick said grimly. "That's all I care about at the moment. This quay is going to be swarming with *polis* any minute."

"*Inshallah*," said Mousy. "Allah willing."

Nick pushed his way through a little knot of silent, staring people. After they had passed the spate of excited chatter began. Turkish, new and old, Greek, Armenian, French! When the cops did arrive they were going to hear some wild stories. And the harbor patrol—they would be going crazy!

Three minutes later, with Mousy still gasping like a fish in the back seat, Nick wheeled a long black Opel sedan along a narrow, cobbled incline toward a corner. One of the large traffic mirrors the Turks use showed nothing approaching from either side. But he had, only a second before, heard a siren somewhere behind.

"*Nereden donecegim?*" he asked Mousy in Turkish. "This is a dead end."

"*Kuzeye*," said Mousy. "Left—north for us. Your Turkish is still pretty good, N3."

Nick nodded. "I had a refresher." He swung the big car

about Mousy at once—he couldn't afford to work with a man who thought his number might be up.

Meantime Mousy was saying: "Anyway I pulled out of the regular station in Pera and came over to Stamboul, to the alternate. I couldn't bring everything, of course, but I brought the basic stuff and the files we'll need. After what happened tonight I'm glad I did. I'm sure this new one is a safe hole, at least for a time. Todhunter didn't even know about it. I didn't want him to! I've had a funny feeling about Todhunter too, of late—not that I didn't trust him or anything like that! He had top clearance. And anyway I *knew* he was on the level—it was just that I had the idea that he might be getting a little careless!"

Nick slowed for a light. He said nothing, just watched the other man's face in the mirror. This time Mousy Morgan did not meet his eye.

Muezzins were calling the faithful to prayer now, their wailing voices promising salvation over amplifiers. Most of the neon lights had flickered out. Traffic had thickened, a scurrying cluster of trams and *dolmus* cabs, donkeys and small cars. Queues were already forming for trams and buses.

The light changed. Nick eased into traffic again. Behind him Mousy Morgan said: "Another reason we had to come the hard way is that you can't steal any boats on this side of the Horn. You got to go to the fishermen for that."

Nick nodded. "Another reason is that Todhunter didn't know about this hole and you didn't want him to—you said that before. So we come the long way and drop him off someplace, then we loaf and see what happens. If he or anyone, tries to follow us." Nick chuckled a little grimly. "So? You've been staring back out of that window for ten minutes now—anyone on our tail?"

"No," said Mousy. "I think it's okay." Nick could hear the relief in his voice. He felt a brief flash of pity for the little guy, then brushed it away. Pity didn't do the business. He would have to watch Mousy ~~from now on~~

a beautiful woman you could never trust. This bothered N3 not at all. He never trusted a woman anyway. Or anyone else, for that matter. With the exception of Hawk. And he must call Hawk, soon, must report in. Mission Pilgrim had gotten off to a bad start!

Over his shoulder Nick said, "How much farther to this cave? It's getting too light for comfort—and it would be hard to explain a couple of bums like us driving a car like this. We've got to go to ground fast. Have a council of war. There are a hell of a lot of questions I want answered before tonight and—Mousy?"

"Yes, N3?"

"You know of course that I'm taking command? I'm Chief of Station as of now?"

The little agent's laugh was shrill with relief. "Know it? Brother, I've been praying for it!"

Nick grinned at him in the mirror. "Okay. Now try to relax. Keep those jitters under control, huh? As soon as I get things under control I'll see about getting a replacement for you."

Mousy Morgan smiled back at the big hard man he worshiped and sometimes feared and knew he would understand. "Hell, Nick, I'll be all right. Just a case of shakes, I guess—seeing poor Tod get it that way!—you turn off just up here. Take the Vatan Road to the right until you see the Mihriman Mosque—and that's it. We're very close to the mosque. Sometimes I think we must be right under the damned thing!"

The ancient double wall that runs like a crescent moon from the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn was just ahead when Nick wheeled the Opel into a rutted muddy alley that ran between rows of wooden shacks. The alley stank in every sense of the word. It was filled with every sort of rubbish and offal, human included. Flies swarmed. Cats prowled.

"Straight ahead now. Through the morgue—and I hope you can stand the smell. It's a pauper's morgue. They bring 'em here until they can be buried."

Nick glanced only cursorily at the half dozen nude bodies, male and female, which lay on a long table beneath trickling streams of water. He noticed that Mousy hurried past the table without glancing at it. Yes, Nick

thought, the poor little bastard has really got the wind up! I'll have to get on to Hawk about him as soon as I can.

There were no attendants about. No one at all. This seemed strange and Nick asked Mousy about it.

"They're around all right. But AXE dough buys a lot of discretion from these people. *Backsheesh*. Anyway they don't give a damn. None of their business what crazy foreigners do as long as they can pay for it. *Inshallah!* You know—if Allah wills it! I've got so I feel that way myself. Everything is—*Inshallah!*"

There was a single screw-in coat hook set into the wooden back wall of the primitive toilet they entered. Mousy twisted it and the wall turned enough to let them slip through into darkness. Immediately a new smell hit Nick's long suffering nostrils.

"Bones," said Mousy as he took out his pen flash and led Nick down a narrow stone floored incline. It was pitch dark in the shaft, except for Mousy's flash, and Nick put his own into use. The first thing he saw was a tremendous rat staring at him from a ledge, its little eyes feral and unafraid.

bent closer and peered, finally cursed and picked up one of the skulls. Nick saw that it had a small red cross marked between the staring empty eyes.

Mousy grunted in satisfaction. "Yeah—this is old Hector, all right. We got so many down here that I had to mark him to tell." He put Hector down and kicked away the rest of the pile of skulls. Nick saw the outline of a trapdoor. The little agent lifted it easily and swung it to one side, revealing a black oblong about three by three. Worn stone stairs circled down.

Mousy gestured with his flash. "Be my guest. Down about two hundred of those steps the girl is waiting. She must be getting stir crazy by now. But I suppose when she sees you, N3, her big brown eyes will light up like beacons!" Mousy gave a phony sigh. "Sometimes I wish I was handsome and big instead of intelligent."

Nick followed Mousy down into the hole. "You said you left someone with the girl? An Albanian?"

"Yeah. Old Bici. Selman Bici, I think." Mousy chuckled. "But he's a mute—can hear but can't talk. So he hasn't been much company!"

Nick said nothing as he followed Mousy down into the dark spiraling pit. He was thinking that he had been right in his diagnosis of Morgan—the little guy had had it. He was probably a candidate for the AXE head-shrinkers back in the States. They were good, the AXE skull-doctors, and sometimes they could salvage a good agent and send him back to duty after he'd cracked up. Sometimes.

Goddammit! Nick thought savagely. Everything has gone wrong on this mission so far. Todhunter gone and Mousy losing his guts and moving the station to this hell-hole, and now the girl. Probably wouldn't be any help! None at all. Might still be on the dope—Mousy wasn't very reliable just now.

Might even be a plant! A beautiful little dope addict who had somehow managed to con everyone—the Turkish police, Narcotics, and now Mousy himself?

It seemed most improbable, but you never knew. Nick's smile vanished—how ironical if she were a plant! Working for them for the enemy! Mousy had panicked and run

from the Pera station—and he had brought the girl along.
Right into the new station!

N3 took a deep breath, then sighed. He hoped she wasn't a plant. He had no real aversion to killing women, but he didn't like it.

They were so much more fun alive!

Chapter 5

COUNCIL OF WAR

They had spent all day talking and planning, Nick and Mousy and the girl, Mija Gialellis, and Nick had not yet begun to form an opinion about her. She had not been out of the Hole since Mousy brought her there, so *that* was no danger. They hadn't been tailed there, or probably hadn't, because the enemy would have hit them before now. These scum didn't fool around—as witnessed by the attack by the cruiser that morning.

N3 was relating all this now to Hawk on the scrambler phone. His boss, like Queen Victoria, had not been amused. He had, in fact, been most upset.

"I just wish to hell you hadn't dropped Tiny Tim in their Golden Horn," he said in the chipped ice voice he used for anger. "Especially right now! The Turks are a little testy with us right now as it is—the Cyprus thing, you know. I just got the poop this morning from State—one of their cookie pushers called and asked us please not to antagonize the Turks in any way. Not just us, of course—everybody is being warned—but anyway the striped pants boys are flapping about it. Seems the Turks are going to the second Bandung Conference pretty soon and they'll be our only friend there—if that. Orders are that everybody handles them with kid gloves—and now you drop a miniature atom bomb in their harbor! Did you *have* to?"

Nick was glad his chief could not see his expression of disgust. "You ever try to fight a thirty-eight-foot cruiser with a stiletto, sir?"

After a long moment Hawk sighed. "Well, I suppose you had to. But State isn't kidding! In their powder-puff fumbling way they usually know what they're doing—and if the Turks grab you I'm afraid it would be a long time

before we could get you out of the clink. Unofficially, of course. Officially we never heard of you."

"No need to remind me of that, sir," Nick was dry. "I know the rules."

"Just thought I'd remind you. The Turks *are* a little on edge just now. Of course they've got Ivan to worry about, as usual, and now they seem to think the Red Chinese are trying to stir up trouble in the Balkans. Probably are, too, but that's not our worry."

"I hope not," Nick said. "I've got about all I can handle now, what with Mousy going bad and not being sure of the girl and Todhunter was the last Narcotics man on the spot! I—"

Hawk broke in. "About Todhunter again—you think they were after *him*? Not you or Mousy? Let me have that again."

Nick repeated what he had said earlier. "Mousy came up with this, and I think he's right. One of the *other* Narcotics men that was killed was Pete Todhunter, Jim's brother! They were very close, Mousy says. And Mousy thought Jim had been getting careless. I think I know why—Jim had forgotten his job and gone into the vengeance business! That's why he fought the cruiser this morning instead of going over the side."

Coldly, Nick added, "Too bad about him, sir, but he had only himself to blame. And he damned near got Mousy and me killed. Anyway Mousy is through—his nerves have gone. I'll have to use him tonight on this deal but after that, no more. Better get him out as fast as you can, sir."

"I'll get him out," Hawk said. "I'll set it up right away. But that's going to leave you pretty much on your own."

"It won't be the first time," Nick reminded him. "Anyway I like it that way. I've decided that about the only way I'll get anywhere is to barge into the china shop and start breaking up the merchandise. That's what I'm going to do tonight—at the Cinema Bleu! That's spelled B-L-E-U, sir, and means—"

Hawk coughed. "I was born a long time before you were, boy! They were making those kind of movies then, too. Just see that you keep your mind on business!"

"I will, sir, I will," Nick added: "I never liked those

blue movies very much anyway, sir. Not enough action for me."

A little silence. Hawk cleared his throat. Then, to Nick's surprise, he came right back with malice in his voice. "There have been certain prophecies, my boy, around here, that when you are found dead it will be in a whorehouse! I think a blue movie will suffice, though it's stretching a point! Now if there's nothing else to say get on with your job—and try to stay out of trouble. Good luck, son."

"Thanks, sir. I'll need it. Goodbye." Nick hung up. He had been tempted to make one last sarcastic remark, but decided against it. He had been brash enough for one day. Still—to send a man to kill four people and then advise him to stay out of trouble! Brother!

He left the clammy little niche where the radio consoles had been set up and went back along the passage to the central cavern. Nick paused at the entrance to the low-domed cavern and inspected the scene. He had finally decided what he must do about the girl—and it had both pleasant and unpleasant aspects.

It was quiet in the cavern. Quiet and damp and cold. Nick could hear water trickling as he lit one of the American cigarettes Mousy had so thoughtfully brought along from the station in Pera. Mousy was sleeping now in one of the niches ringing the cavern, sleeping from sheer exhaustion and a little too much fiery Turkish *raki* supplied by the old Albanian. Bici?

Yes, that was it. Bici! AXE, it appeared, had in some way inherited him from the British. Mousy swore by him. He seemed okay. An old man of incredibly dirty and gnarled strength, he had fierce drooping *moustachios* and smoked a stinking cutty pipe. He was also sleeping now and his snores were the only audible sounds in the place.

No sound came from the niche where the girl slept. Nick made a slight move in her direction, then halted. He glanced at his watch. Plenty of time before the job tonight. Meantime he had some thinking to do.

His briefing from Mousy that afternoon had been as comprehensive as the little man could make it. He had acquired substantial *dossiers* on three of the four they were after—there was not much on Johnny Ruthless who, in any case, had dropped out of sight.

Nick, who had been briefed in Washington on these men, nevertheless went through the local *dossiers*. There might be something Washington had overlooked, though it was unlikely.

Maurice Defarge, about sixty, fat, suffering from a heart condition. Of French origin, now a Turkish national. No record in France. Clean in Turkey except for certain rumors and suspicions, none of which could be proven. Head of Defarge Exporting Company, Ltd., with offices on top floor of the Divan Annex. Also lives on same floor in palatial suite which, along with offices, occupies entire floor. Unmarried. No obvious interest in women or men. Age may account for this. Exports tobacco and rugs. If connected with Syndicate is probably in administrative capacity. Many pictures available. All attempts to bug or tap have failed.

"That's one of the main difficulties," Mousy said. "These bastards must have a counter-intelligence setup that's a beauty. Professional! No matter what we try, how many electronic bugs we come up with, nothing works. They all go dead. Vanish. They know everything we know and how to guard against it. It's been driving us nuts! The only reason we ever tumbled to Defarge was that he visits the Cinema Bleu every now and then, and seems to be a friend of the woman who runs the place. Her name's Leslie Standish and the Turkish cops *know* she peddles dope. But she's small time and they're trying to use her. I talked them into letting us have a crack at her. We'll know more about that tonight, of course."

Mija Gialellis, sipping at a small glass of *ouza*, a resinous wine she said she preferred to the potent *rafi*—"after all I am half Greek"—put in a word at this point. The girl had not spoken much at first, and when she did she used English. For practice, she explained.

Now she said: "I saw this man Defarge in the Cinema Bleu at one or two times when I go there. One time I see him come from office of Leslie Standish. I—I myself am just come out." She paused for a moment, her oval brown eyes meeting Nick's searching glance without turning

away. "It was when I was—how you say it? Using the dope? I am sorry—my English is not good?"

"It's better than my Turkish," Nick told her. He had not yet decided what to do about Mija. It could wait.

He went on, "What do you think he was doing there? A man of his age? Probably not a user?"

The girl had sturdy expressive shoulders. She used them now. Her full red mouth crinkled in a rather weary smile. "I not concern myself to think. I—I have myself troubles, you understand? But—wait! There is one thing I remember I think—that he looks like a crooks in American movie. A fat crooks!"

Mousy, who had been at the *raki* bottle again, grinned at her. "We've got a lot of fat crooks in the States. Both in the movies and out! Come on, Mija. Think, girl!"

She ran a small hand through her cap of shining blue-black hair. "Ohh—dum it! I cannot now—wait, I remember now. Sidney Groundstreet! No?"

"Greenstreet," said Nick. He regarded her closely, hinking that if she were a plant she was playing the part ell. He'd know about that soon enough now. He continued, "Don't you think he went there for the same reason most people do? For the show?"

Mija made a face. "Oh, that! The bad pictures. No, I do not think so. He was alone—and the Standish did not allow but couples. It is a—a policy." She waved her hands in a little gesture and Nick thought he saw a hint of amusement in her eyes. "It does not matter *what* couples, but must be couples!"

Mousy Morgan broke in again with a small leer. "Maybe the Standish dame was giving him a private show?"

Mija laughed shortly. "Not so. She is not like mans!"

Nick gave Mousy a look and the little man subsided. Nick had purposely allowed Mousy to get loaded because he knew how desperately the little guy needed a break, a chance to relax. Before the job tonight Nick was going to hold his head under one of the icy streams that trickled from the cavern's ceiling. Nick grinned at the thought. He had taken a bath and shaved in that water! Mousy would be sober tonight!

Now he said, rather harshly, "Let's get on with it!"

Carlos Gonzalez. Basque. About fifty. Former boxer in Europe and the States. Fine physique now going to fat. Many scars on face, mostly around eyes. Champion pelota player at one time in Spain. Married once, but no record of divorce and no sign of wife. Maybe suggestive, maybe not. Appears to have great physical strength. Hard to accumulate data on Gonzalez—background is hazy. Claims to be a geologist and may be, but suspect not. Has license from Turkish Government to prospect for oil, but this easily acquired. Does prospect with oil finding equipment, in Taurus and eastern Anatolia. Apparently spends much time in vicinity of Lake Van. No record of any kind obtainable on this man. Never in trouble with police so far as is known. Still a Spanish national but has Turkish resident permit. Two items possible importance—speaks Kurdish and is friendly with Kurds. If connected with Syndicate is probably in capacity of field organizer.

Nick looked at Mousy. The little man was smoking silently, staring at the ceiling of the cave. Now he said, "It's pretty obvious that this broken down pelota player is the straw boss, so to speak. We think he organizes the smuggling trains that take the opium across the border into Syria and Iran. Never been able to prove a damned thing, naturally. Can't catch him at it—I mean the border patrols never have! All they ever get after a raid, or a trap, is a lot of dead Kurds and even if they do get some live ones they never talk! Hot irons won't make a Kurd talk if he don't want to! We think maybe Gonzalez uses terror—you know, their families back home will get hurt if they talk. But Kurds are crazy wild bastards anyway—perfect for smuggling. Kurds hate everybody but Kurds! And it's been hard to get much on this Basque bastard because he hardly ever comes into civilization—stays out in the wilderness all the time. And there's plenty of that out there, believe me!"

Mousy reached for the *raki* jug.

"No!" Nick's voice was sharp. "Lay off the popskull for now, Mousy. Let's get this over with and get some sleep. What about this Dr. Six—Joseph Six? Washington says he was a Nazi—worked as a doctor in a concentration camp! That right?"

Mousy reluctantly took his hand away from the jug. Old Bici, the Albanian, took the opportunity to seize it and put away a drink of terrifying proportions. Mousy stared at him in fascination while Bici wiped his *moustachios* on the back of a dirty hand. "My God," said Mousy in a reverent tone. "That would have killed me."

Nick was tolerant. "Mousy! Dr. Six?"

The little agent shrugged his thin shoulders. "Same old story. Can't prove a damned thing. He is a doctor, all right. *Doktor. Arzt.* Medicine, that is. At least I think it is—anyway I'd hate to know what he specialized in in those concentration camps!"

N3's face was usually impassive. Never did it betray an emotion he did not wish it to. But someone who knew him intimately—and there were very few—would have noticed a slight hardening of his face now. He hated no one in the accepted sense of the word. In his job he could not afford to hate. It got you involved emotionally. Ruined your judgment. You made mistakes. No—N3 did not hate. But if he had a preference for killing it would be those who ran concentration camps—no matter when or where or for what dictatorship.

Nick said now, "Odd the Turks would let a character like that hang around."

"They need doctors," Mousy said. "How they need them! They're building a whole new country and every little bit helps. Anyway it's sort of like the opium—our problems aren't exactly *their* problems! They need us and they cooperate, but the viewpoints are different. And nothing can be proven against this Six. They had to let him go in Germany, after the war, and if *they* couldn't hang him—!"

Dr. Joseph Six. German. In Turkey on resident and valued worker's permit. Age—about sixty-five. Tall, thin, so called intellectual type. Runs sanitarium on the Bosphorus, European side, near Lido Hotel. Has wealthy clientele, but also runs large clinic for the poor. Later fact believed to influence attitude of Turkish police. Friend of Defarge, who several times has stayed at sanitarium for treatment of heart condition. If connected with Syndicate cannot guess in what capacity.

Nick stared at Mousy, but for the moment hardly saw the little man. Mousy had compiled the *dossiers*, but then Mousy was vastly inexperienced compared to Nick. Nick thought he saw how a man like Dr. Six could be useful. Sometimes the enforcers of the Syndicate wouldn't want to kill a man, at least not at first. They would want to question him! What better place than a sanitarium with its operating table and its truth serums and its sharp little knives?"

"I think I can guess the capacity," Nick said. For some reason Mousy found himself shivering at the chill in his chief's voice. Then the moment passed. Nick said, "And now we get to the last—but I've got an idea not least—Johnny Ruthless! From all I hear we don't know much about him?"

"You hear right," Mousy admitted. He took off his horn rims and polished them. Nick, without particular compassion, noted how pale and fatigued the little guy was, how the purple shadows beneath the weak eyes were rapidly becoming pouches. This was a nasty job and it had moved in suddenly and Mousy wasn't the man for it. After tonight he would be on his way back to the States and a nice long rest.

"We don't even know his name," Mousy said, replacing his glasses. He peered through the candle-guttering gloom at Nick. "Just that everybody clams up the minute you mention Johnny Ruthless! We know so little that I didn't even try to compile a *dossier* on him. I'll just give it to you first hand, shall I? What we think, what we know, what we suspect—anyway you look at it it's not much."

The Albanian had banished into his niche some time before. Now Mija Gialellis stood up with a graceful motion. She was wearing black stretch pants that moulded her long legs beautifully. She looked at Nick.

"*Affedersiniz?*"

Nick nodded curtly. "Excused. I'll want to talk to you later, alone."

The girl nodded and went to her niche and disappeared. They heard cot springs squeak.

Nick looked at Mousy. "Now tell me about our Johnny."

"Okay. I hope you won't be disappointed. First—no

pix of any sort. By the time we knew we needed pictures he wasn't around any more. That was about three months ago, when this thing started to get hot. But his description, from all we've been able to get since, is that he's young—about thirty, maybe. Slim. Good looking, with a little pencil moustache. Black hair slicked down close to his head. One thing—he seems to like to wear evening clothes. You know, a dinner jacket. A tux.”

“Eyes?”

Mousy nodded. “Now that’s one thing we got pretty universal agreement on—coal black. Sort of a staring look.”

Nick rubbed his chin. “I thought you said you couldn’t get people to talk about this guy? You seem to have done pretty well.”

“Not really.” Mousy lit a cigarette. “All that stuff is what we got from joints around town, mostly high class night clubs and so on, *after* we got interested in the guy. We got it from headwaiters, bartenders, people like that, who didn’t really know him. Just vaguely remembered him. But every time we got a lead to someone who had actually *known* him—that was different! For one thing—” and Mousy sighed—“a lot of them just weren’t around any more! Vanished. We did find one guy who admitted having known Johnny Ruthless—he had the nerve to tell us he thought it was the guy’s right name—and I think maybe he slipped a little. He said he thought Ruthless was from Chicago—”

“Chicago?”

“Yeah—then the guy got so scared at what he’d said that *he* clammed up. Not even the Turkish police could make him talk—and if they can’t, no one can. Later they found out he had a phony passport and deported him. Anyway he claimed that he hadn’t known Johnny very well, just around the gambling clubs and such. And didn’t know where he lived. *Nobody* we talked to had the faintest idea where Johnny lived. It was like the guy didn’t have a home!”

Nick was thoughtful. “It’s hard to see how anyone could be so evasive. The Turkish police are supposed to be pretty good.”

“They are. But this character was like a ghost.”

"You make him sound like one, I'll admit. But even hosts have to live somewhere."

Mousy shrugged. "I told you—it's a bastard!"

"Most cold trails are," Nick agreed. "Now, from Washington I got it that the first Narcotics man was murdered about six months ago?"

"Right. Fished out of the Bosphorus with his throat cut. All of his identification on him. They wanted us to now—of course it wasn't *our* job then!"

Nick nodded. "Of course. It was a warning. Three months ago another Narcotics man was killed. Right?"

"Yes. Same thing. Pulled out of the Bosphorus with his throat cut."

Nick lit a cigarette. "And it was then, after this second murder, that you started looking for Johnny Ruthless and he had vanished?"

Mousy looked at the *raki* bottle. Nick pushed it away. "Yes," said Mousy. "We—the Narcotics people—had one vague tip that the second murdered guy had been seen talking to someone who might have been Johnny Ruthless. Anyway when they started looking for him he had dropped out of sight. No report of him since."

Nick pondered, remembering his Washington briefing. "Then in recent weeks Narcotics lost two more men—on of them being Pete Todhunter, Jim's brother?"

Mousy was beginning to look miserable.

"Right. Both with their throats cut. Only difference being that one of *them* was found in the Golden Horn instead of in the Bosphorus."

"We've got a razor man on our hands," Nick Carter said, almost to himself. "The good old fashioned straight edge razor. A nasty weapon."

Mousy stared at him. "How do you know? The Turkish MO said he couldn't be sure."

Mousy happened to be looking straight into Nick Carter's eyes as he spoke. He could never quite remember the color of this big man's eyes. They changed. Now he thought they were green, a deep sea green, and for a moment a shark swirled and turned in the depths. Mousy shivered.

"I know," said Nick Carter softly. "It's got the feel. A razor man is a sadist—loves his work." He looked at

Mousy and grinned and suddenly the little man felt

Nick said: "Better get some sleep now, Mousy. Remember I got a date to take you to the movies tonight."

The little agent made a face. "The things I AXE! Letting myself be dressed as a girl and taken feelthy moving peectures!" But he laughed. "You ised you would never tell anyone back in Wash about this?"

"I know," said Nick. "Now beat it. I'll call you it's time to begin the beguine."

The tall anvil shouldered man who had been st so long in the chill shadows stirred at last. He took a deep breath and peered around and for a moment his eyes were vacant and unfocused.

Nick glanced at his wrist watch. He had been st motionless for nearly an hour. He flexed the big smooth running muscles and took a few deep breaths and a few knee bends. Then he glanced toward the where the girl slept. Best get on with it.

Nick took a large and powerful flash from a shelf and went to the niche. Mija Gialellis was sleeping on her side, her cheek cushioned on her arms. Her breathing was slow and peaceful. If she's got a bad conscience thought, she doesn't let it bother her. But then again, she's a pro—or a junky!

Nick wasted no time. He directed the powerful flash full into her face. The girl came awake with a frightened little cry—"Uhhhh!"

"Don't be afraid," Nick said. "I'm not going to hurt you. But I've got to do this. Take off your clothes!"

"What!" Her red mouth was a round red O of astonishment as she stared into the light, her smoky brown eyes narrowed. She was fully clothed, yet instinctively she clutched the single sleazy blanket to her breasts.

"Look," said Nick Carter patiently. "I'll explain it to you. No more. Then if you don't cooperate I'll take off my clothes myself. Okay. You say you're a cured addict. You say you want to help us! Maybe it's true. I hope it is. I can't take your word for it—surely you can see that. Take off your clothes, please, so I can look for fresh marks. If you're clean—fine. If not—well, then I know, won't we? Now start undressing. I won't

"I'm working, Mija! This isn't pleasure for me." Nick didn't help wondering if that last statement was a hundred percent true?

"Yok!" The Turkish NO that really means NO! She sat on the cot, still clutching the blanket to her. "This is a terrible thing you do to me! I will not! You cannot make

anything to reassure her, keeping his own voice low, he said: "Evet! Yes I can! I will if you force me. Now!" Her mouth began to tremble. In a voice of entreaty she pleaded, "Rica ederim?"

Nick firmed his voice. "Begging won't help, Mija. Now undressing. Right now!" N3's voice cracked like a

gun. The girl glanced wildly around. "No use screaming for me," Nick told her. "You don't need it—and it won't do you good. I give the orders."

He hesitated. Nick reached a hand for the blanket. In the angled light she saw the planes of his face as hard as steel. She twisted away. "Yok! I—I will do it!"

"Good." He stepped back and directed the flash on her. "That will save everybody a lot of trouble. Take off all your clothes and then stretch out on the cot face down." Mija Gialellis sat on the edge of the cot and began to undress, her lovely face distorted by a scowl of rage. "I want to hate you for this," she spat. "Forever I hate you! If I am alive to be many years I shall hate you and—"

"Shut up," Nick told her. "You talk too much. Just keep quiet and get on with it. It'll be over just that much sooner."

Mija unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged out of it. She put it on the cot and bent forward to begin sliding off the black stretch pants.

"Your brassiere, too," Nick commanded. "I said everything. I meant everything!"

She gave him a look of pure hatred. "You are filthy! You want the peeps show!"

Nick gave her a look. "What I don't want is to lose patience with you! But—" He took a step toward the cot. "Yok!"

She craned behind her to unsnap the black brassiere and slide it down slim arms. Mija tossed it on the floor.

Mousy and grinned and suddenly the little man felt better.

Nick said: "Better get some sleep now, Mousy. Remember I got a date to take you to the movies tonight!"

The little agent made a face. "The things I do for AXE! Letting myself be dressed as a girl and taken to see feelthy moving peectures!" But he laughed. "You promised you would never tell anyone back in Washington about this?"

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Nick took a large and powerful flash from a clammy ledge and went to the niche. Mija Gialellis was sleeping on her side, her cheek cushioned on her arms. Her breathing was slow and peaceful. If she's got a bad conscience, Nick thought, she doesn't let it bother her. But then maybe she's a pro—or a junky!

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you. I'm working, Mija! This isn't pleasure for me." Nick couldn't help wondering if that last statement was a hundred percent true?

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"*Yok!*"

She craned behind her to unsnap the black brassiere and slide it down slim arms. Mija tossed it on the floor

with a gasp of frustrated rage. She glared at him, making no effort to cover her small melon sized breasts. "You are satisfy now?"

Nick repressed a grin. She was working up a full head of steam. Sternly he said, "No. I'm not. Now the pants, please."

Her firm breasts, red-ochre tipped, rippled as she leaned to obey. She did not look at him now. Her flesh was a tawny shade, a trifle lighter than olive and smooth with a fine texture. The top of her head, in the blaze of the flashlight, glistened like a black helmet. Nick heard her choke back a sob, whether in rage or hurt modesty he did not know. Or care. They were getting on with the job. Soon he would know at least part of the truth about her.

The stretch pants were on the floor. She was wearing a pair of very skimpy white panties. Nick waited. She did not move.

"Off with them," he commanded.

She stared sullenly at the floor. "I will not. It is too much!"

"Damn it!" Nick moved.

"*Hayir!*" The more gentle no this time. "I—I will do myself." A stretch and slither of elastic and nylon and the panties were on the floor.

"That's fine," said Nick. He smiled at her, trying to ease things a bit. "You could make a good living striping in the States, you know. You take long enough. Now turn over on the cot."

Mija scowled. "Y—you promise you will not touch me?"

"I promise. Now turn over!"

The girl turned over and lay face down. Nick took a step forward and saw her tense. "Relax," he said cheerfully. "This won't hurt a bit."

Beginning at her ankles he moved the flash up along the splendid body. Her legs were longer than he had thought at first, the ankles sturdy but clean boned, the flesh behind the knees taut flexured. Nick realized that Mija had the body of a fine girl athlete. He saw that she was trembling ever so slightly. To put her at ease he asked, casually, if she had ever been an athlete. To his surprise she answered.

"Yes. Since I am a little girl until—you know—"

Nick nodded savagely. He knew. Until she got the monkey on her back! Until life became a desperate stretch of time from one fix to another!

Nick took the light up over fine lean hips and buttocks that were just rounded enough. A waist amazingly small. Strong column of spine, lying sinuous under muscles that rippled beneath tawny velvet smooth skin. Her shoulders were wide for a girl.

So far Nick had not detected a blemish, not even a mole. But he knew what he would find when she turned over. Just so none of them were fresh!

"Okay," he told her. "You can turn over now."

He had expected another argument, but instead Mija rolled docilely over on her back. She kept her eyes tightly closed.

Nick saw them then. Little white stipples, countless tiny scars around her shoulders and the inner upper arms. Both shoulders. Both arms. This kid had been a mainliner. It was a marvel she had ever made it back. If she had!

He could not find a fresh scar. One possible spot remained.

"Raise your breasts," he told her.

The girl's long brown eyes flew open. "What?"

"Raise your breasts with your hands so I can see under to the ribcage. Come on, now, Mija! It's almost over."

She closed her eyes again. She took one solid breast in each hand and lifted it. No scars. Nick turned away. "Fine. You can get dressed now."

"You will turn the light away, please? I can dress in the dark." Nick did so. He heard a rustle and slide of clothing. Then she stopped dressing. "You trust me now?"

"Not exactly," he said. "But it's a big point in your favor. Ready for the light?"

"Yes, please." There was a subtle change in her tone of voice. Softer? Certainly no longer the tones of anger or outrage. He clicked on the flash and faced her. "I'm sorry I had to do that, Mija. But you of all people should understand! You know what we're up against, what we must do. We've got to destroy those people—I couldn't take a chance that you were a plant for them!"

There was a look of curious tenderness in the eyes c

Mija Gialellis as she looked at Nick. Moisture sparkled on her lashes. "I do know," she said softly. "And I thank you—Nick! For being with me so gentle. B—But you say you still do not trust me?"

If there was any softness about him she could not find it. Nick regarded her levelly for a moment, then said, "That will have to wait, Mija. Trust—and perhaps other things. Come on, now. I've got to get Mousy made up to something reasonably like a woman. At least in a dark alley. You can help."

But for a moment neither moved. Their eyes clung, his somber and hard, hers softened now even in the harsh light.

N3 knew then that there was going to be something between them. *Inshallah!* As Mousy would say.

"Come on," he commanded. "It's getting late."

Mija smiled at him. She knew.

They both knew.

Chapter 6

CINEMA BLEU

Le Cinema Bleu made no bones about its existence on a mean street in the Egyptian Bazaar sector, near the Galata bridge. In fact the *Cinema Bleu* advertised—a squiggle of neon tubing on either side of a plain door of blue painted wood advised the public that within might be found food, drink, and entertainment. Said entertainment consisting of a poodle act, a snake dancer, and Rafe Burke's Jazz Combo straight from the United States. That was all that was promised.

Yet within *Le Cinema*, as the hour approached midnight, there was an air of expectancy. Patrons, all couples of various sorts and sexes, kept glancing at the Pernod clock over the bar and consulting their watches. One couple, however, seemed very much intent on their own affairs to the exclusion of everything else.

Mustafa Bey of the Istanbul police, plain clothes, could not quite figure this particular couple. He did not try very hard. This was all very old hat to him by now—he and Memet had been sitting around *Le Cinema* for three months now, with orders to protect the Standish woman—and Mustafa Bey was a little bored with it all. Still—that couple at the tiny table in the dark corner? It gave one to think that such freakish matters could occur, that such oddly matched couples should ever get together! One so small and skinny and—Mustafa Bey shuddered—ugly! The man was not bad, he supposed, if you liked big men in ill fitting suits. Mustafa Bey sipped at his *Pernod*, which he much preferred to *raki*, and considered the couple again. He grimaced. Allah only knew what they could see in each other, but then love was a crazy thing. It probably was love—they spent so much time whispering to each other. But then—and Mustafa Bey took another

drink and sighed—in this place and all like it a great many strange things passed for love. He glanced at the clock over the bar. Five minutes to midnight. Then those who held cards would go upstairs to see the dirty pictures.

Mustafa Bey shrugged. He had seen the pictures. Not very good. Like everything else out of Syria. The film was coarse and grainy, the focus always bad, the photography amateurish. Even the actors and actresses—Mustafa Bey left his bar stool and went to check on the Standish woman. He went off at twelve. Let Memet worry about things from now on.

The couple at the tiny table in the dark corner watched him go. The man pulled at his collar again, trying to breathe. The horror of a saffron shirt, besides being dirty, was at least two sizes too small. He loosened his tie, sighed in relief, and spoke to the small woman beside him.

"This will be his last check on Standish, right?"

The woman wore a scarf over stiff looking brown hair, a pair of horn rimmed glasses that gave her the appearance—as Nick had said earlier—of a pregnant owl, and a rather expensive looking blue frock that would have gone well with the proper figure. Now she lit a cigarette with nicotine stained fingers which trembled slightly.

"Yeah. He goes off in a couple of minutes. Another guy, Memet, I think, comes on then. The first thing *he'll* do is make another quick check on Standish, then duck upstairs to see the show." She laughed in a squeaky voice that suddenly slid down into the upper male register.

"He's younger than the other one. Dirty movies still give him a charge! Of course that's a break for us. And I've got a crazy feeling, Nick, that we're going to need a break on this one!"

The man kicked under the table. The woman said, "Ouch, damn it!"

"Stay in character," the man said. "And keep that squeaky voice up! And down! I'll admit you're not much of a date, but you're all I've got." He glanced at his wrist. "One minute. Just what exactly happens then?"

"They click the lights off and on—three times. That means that the feeelthy peectures will be starting in fifteen minutes. Those with cards go up those iron stairs over there in the corner. Upstairs there's a long room with

regular chairs—and couches and sofas for those who want them. There's a screen and a projector. That's all."

The man lit a Turkish cigarette and coughed bitterly. "Damn these things! How do you get one of those cards?"

"From the boss lady herself, Leslie Standish. She has to pass on you. From what I hear she's not very strict—if you've got ten Turkish pounds."

"Ummm—" the man picked brown specks of tobacco from his tongue. "Does the Standish woman ever go up to watch the show?"

"Not usually. She stays in her office most of the time."

The big man, whose muscles seemed about to tear his jacket apart even in repose, smoked for a moment in silence. Then, "One thing about this setup bothers me—they don't seem to worry about the back! Must be a good reason for that?"

"There is. Nothing back there but a little court for junk and garbage and a wall ten feet high with glass set in it."

"People can get over walls."

"If you went over this one," the woman said, "you'd go down into a hell of a mess! A slough runs in from the Horn—and a sewer empties into it! You can't even get a boat through the stuff."

"It still worries me," said the big man. "I wish we'd had more time to case this thing."

"*Inshallah!* I thought I was the worrier in this outfit!"

The big man frowned and tried to adjust himself again to the instrument of torture *Le Cinema* called a chair. He also tried to ease his constricted waist. It was a slim waist, slim and hard and muscular, but these pants defeated it. The 9mm Luger in the waistband did nothing to help.

The lights flicked off and on. Three times. Beyond a momentary stoppage in the flow and buzz of conversation no one appeared to pay much attention. Glasses tinkled and clouds of gray-blue smoke drifted through the murky, breathless, hot little *cave* as usual. An occasional spate of laughter pierced the endless, surf-like hum of talk. Then, as if some demon magician were at work, people began to vanish.

The couple at the table in the corner did not move. They watched as Mustafa Bey returned to the little bar

and greeted his relief. The two exchanged a few words, then Mustafa Bey left. The younger policeman lingered at the bar a moment for a drink, then vanished behind curtains to a corridor beyond.

"Regular routine," the woman in the horn rims said. "He'll make a fast check on Standish, then duck upstairs to see the feelthies! Then we go, eh? Can't be too soon for me, Nick. I'm getting the jeebies just sitting here."

"Then we go," said Nick Carter. "We can stop playing nasquerade and start operating. I'm as sick of this as you are, Mousy, but it's the best way. Now let's go over it once more, just to make sure. You know your lines?"

"I should," said Mousy Morgan, sounding grim behind the horrible mess of paint and powder and lipstick that covered his pinched features. "You've made me go over it enough."

"Once more, then."

Mousy sighed. "When you leave to go to the john I take off. I go back to the Opel, start the engine, open the door and wait over against the wall of the alley with the tom gun. No lights, of course. I cover the alley entrance when you come around with the Standish woman. If you don't got company, meaning anyone on your tail, then we go. You slam her in back and I drive and we get our tails out of there! That's all."

Nick Carter nodded. "And if I'm in trouble—if I *have* got company? This is the most important part, Mousy. It's got to be done right!"

I hope—Nick added silently to himself. Mousy with a machine gun wasn't exactly his idea of a safe Fourth of July. Not the way the little guy's nerves had been kicking up. But it had to be—there was no one else to help.

"I've got that, too," Mousy was saying. "We don't want to kill any Turkish cops! Better they get us than we kill any cops—so if you're in trouble you let out a yell. I listen. Then maybe I let go with the chopper and maybe I don't."

Nick said: "For God's sake be careful. If I yell **ROBBERS**, then start shooting—and not at me! If I yell **COPS** drop the gun and take off. Try to get away the best you can. I'll meet you back at the Hole—if I make it! If we get jammed it's every man for himself."

"It just occurred to me," Mousy said gloomily. "That we are parked in a dead end. There's no other way out of that damned alley, Nick."

"Climb the wall," said Nick coldly. "Well, here I go. The joint is nearly empty. They must be into the third reel by this time." He pushed back the rickety chair and was about to rise when Mousy put a hand on his arm. "Hold it!"

Nick sank into the chair again. "What?"

His partner nodded toward the bar, now nearly deserted. A blonde girl was talking to the bartender, leaning over the bar, her back to them. She was lithe and slim and the spike heels made her appear taller. The black evening dress she wore was tight across hips and thighs that were smooth and round and unblemished by any girdle bulge. She was wearing a short mink jacket and wore a mass of corn yellow hair piled high.

"So?" Nick was impatient. "Maybe she's never been here before. She wants to know where they show the dirty movies, that's all."

"That's not it," said Mousy. "Better get back into character, Nick. See what happens. That's Marion Talbot—she's Maurice Defarge's private secretary!"

N3 sighed, sank back in the obscenity of a chair, and lit a cigarette. He toyed with the glass of *raki* before him. He segued once more into the role of a stupid young Turk in from the provinces for a nasty night on the town. He tugged at the too tight collar and gave his small confederate a look in which ice glinted. In a soft voice which might have been a lover's voice, but was definitely not, he said: "This is rather an unexpected development, isn't it? Especially right now—at this particular god-damned minute! I don't recall any mention of Defarge having a secretary, private or otherwise. Or do I need glasses? It wasn't in the *dossier*, was it?"

As he spoke he watched the blonde. The bartender was speaking into an intercom on the backbar. While she waited the blonde took a cigarette from a gold case, lit it, and glanced around the smoky room. Her gaze flicked past the strange couple at the little table without halting. Then the bartender said something and the blonde disappeared through the curtains.

"She was checked out," Mousy said. He sounded a little defiant. Nick thought. He watched as Mousy lit another cigarette. The little man's fingers were trembling visibly. Nick thought of Mousy handling a tommy gun and groaned inwardly. The guy was falling apart right in front of his eyes. Better move fast!

"Narcotics had the FBI check her in the States," Mousy said. "Clean as a whistle. From a good family in St. Louis. She studied art in New York and Paris for awhile, then she fell in love with some phony Italian Count, or Baron, you know—and he left her flat here in Stamboul. I guess she had plenty of dough. Anyway she went to work for Defarge. That was all, as far as the Turkish cops, or Narcotics, could find out. She's just a private secretary!"

Nick Carter did not look at him. "Yet here she is! Just as I'm about to take the Standish woman out—here she is!"

Mousy nodded. Beneath the woman's makeup the little agent was beginning to look like some ghastly caricature of a sick clown. Nick had seen combat fatigue cases like that. He made up his mind.

"Take off now," he told Mousy. "Go back to the car and wait. The plan is the same, though I may be a bit longer than expected. But I'll be there—with Leslie Standish or without her. Beat it, Mousy. Be careful."

After Mousy had gone N3 waited fifteen minutes. The tall blonde in the mink jacket did not appear. To hell with it, Nick told himself. This show begins right now! He turned a heavy signet ring on his finger so the intaglio surface was beneath the finger, in line with his palm. There was a tiny, barely visible needle set into the face of the ring. A miniature hypo. Anyone slapped or struck lightly with the ring would receive an injection that acted in seconds, putting the recipient into a gentle trance. They could walk and talk and obey, and the stuff made them very docile. Nick intended to take Leslie Standish out of the *Cinema Bleu*, take her back to the Hole for a little down-to-earth questioning. N3 smiled grimly at the bad pun. He was sure that Leslie Standish would cooperate with Hugo the stiletto!

But now this Marion Talbot, fat old Defarge's secretary,

was back there with the Standish woman. Nick twisted the ring again and stood up. There should be enough drug for two!

He reached beneath his chair for the monstrosity of a green hat that was part of his character tonight. It was a fedora, bilious green and wide brimmed. Nick had darkened his face a trifle and was wearing rubber cheek pads. Now he set the hat squarely on his head—his hair was greasy with sweet stinking brilliantine—and thought that not even Hawk would know him. Or want to.

Acting like a man who really had to go, he approached the bartender. The bar was empty at the moment and the man was reading a copy of *Vatan*.

"*Erkekler tuvaleti?*"

Without glancing from his paper the man nodded at the curtains and said, "*Dogru yuruyunuz.*"

"*Cok.*"

Nick went through the curtains. One dim ceiling light showed him a narrow corridor leading back to a blank wall. The floor was of wood, splintered and dirty, and the corridor stank of antiseptic. To his right, as he went swiftly down the hall, were two doors leading to the rest rooms. He kept on going.

As he approached the end of the corridor, where another shorter hallway slashed over to the T, he moved lightly on the balls of his feet. All resemblance to a Turkish lout from the provinces vanished. Even the horrible, too tightly fitting suit could not disguise the splendid animal on the prowl. This was KILLMASTER going to work!

Noiselessly he approached the corner. Halted, fell to his knees as gracefully as a cat and peered around at thigh level. The little corridor was empty. To his left a crack of light glowed beneath a door.

To his right a door stood half open. As N3 watched the door moved, swaying, then banged suddenly. Nick let the tension drain from him and went swiftly to the door. It banged again in the wind as he reached it. This would be the door leading into the courtyard, with the high wall and the slough and the sewer beyond. Nick glanced back at the light glowing beneath the office door, then decided—let her wait a minute or so. He liked to check his back holes!

But without silhouetting himself against light! In the space of a heart beat he was out of the door and into the whimpering wind and rain and darkness. He flattened himself against a rough brick wall and blinked rapidly to help his eyes adjust. As he stood there, waiting, just one more shadow, Nick realized that he had underestimated the vagaries of Turkish weather. It had been fair when he and Mousy had entered *Le Cinema Bleu*—now rain was falling in thick gray ropes, twisted and snarled by a steadily rising wind. N3 shrugged his big shoulders. Weather meant little to him except as it affected the success or failure of a mission. But his mouth quirked—he could feel the cheap suit shrinking already!

Automatically, without conscious thought, he checked the Luger. Wilhelmina baby might just have work to do tonight! N3 found himself wishing it were so! This whole goddamned setup was beginning to get on his nerves—nothing had gone right so far and he had an uneasy sensation that things would get worse before they got better. Nick Carter had been on jobs like this before and he knew the feeling. The fact that, by average standards, he had no nerves at all did not matter. Things were going badly!

Nick checked Hugo, the vicious little stiletto lying snug along his forearm. Pierre, the gas pellet, was back at the Hole.

He could see clearly now and one glance told him that matters were as Mousy had described them. The high wall, the littered courtyard—nothing else. No way out—

Wind swooped into the little court, a sudden vicious little gust, and blew it against Nick's hand. He had been standing within a foot of it in the dark, all this while, not suspecting its presence.

A rope ladder!

N3 cursed beneath his breath. He flattened himself against the wall again and examined the ladder, more by feel than sight. So much for the Turkish cops and their precautions!

It was just an ordinary rope ladder with wooden rungs. It came straight down from the flat roof three floors up. N3 cursed again and spun it away from him. God knows who had been up and down that ladder tonight!

He had a sickening feeling that the time for stealth was past. He slid through the door and headed for the sliver of light at the far end of the short cross corridor. As he crossed the main hall he glanced down it. Empty.

It was a plain brown door with OFFICE stenciled on it in faded gold letters. Nick tried the knob. Fingerprints didn't matter a damn now. The door swung open and he stepped into the office. He closed it softly behind him. A solitary lamp burned on a desk in one corner.

Nick smelled it before he saw it. Blood! A thick, sweetish odor. Nick had smelled it many times in his life. He reached behind him to latch the door, then took the Luger from his belt. Through a half open door set in one side of the small office he saw the glint of bathroom fixtures.

For the moment he did not so much as glance at the body of the woman by the desk. He went swiftly around the room, careful not to step in blood, and approached the bathroom. He kicked the door open and went in. Empty. A commode, a wash basin and medicine chest glinting pale in faint yellow light. Nothing else. Then N3 stopped to sniff again. There was something else. Another smell! This one sharp and biting to his nostrils. A dry tangy odor, contrasting with the wet stickiness of the blood smell. N3 stood in the bathroom for a moment, sniffing, puzzled. It was a familiar smell, damn it. One he had been around before—then he had it. Nail polish remover. Acetone! N3 smiled and went back into the office.

This time he cautiously approached the body of the woman. She lay on her back near the desk, her arms flung wide, her eyes staring at the ceiling. Around her head and shoulders the blood was already clotting and turning black. Her throat had been cut. Cut with a stroke so vicious that the grizzled head, with the short mannish haircut, was lying aslant at a weird angle. The throat had been cut clear through to the spine, very nearly severing the head.

Nick glanced at his watch, then thrust the Luger back in his belt. Very carefully, keeping away from the blood, he knelt and picked up one of the dead hands. He

examined the nails. They were clean, blunt, free of any hint of polish.

Nick dropped the hand and stood up. For a moment he stood contemplating the body. Leslie Standish would not have used nail polish. Mija had given them the right steer on that, he was sure. Doubly sure now as he stood looking down at the dead woman, filing away facts for future reference. And the facts were plain enough. Probably not even very important now, at least from his viewpoint. Leslie Standish wasn't going to help the Turkish cops now, that was sure. And she wasn't going to talk to the stiletto, either. Someone—guess who?—had made sure of that!

N3 stood very quietly near the dead woman while his mind and eyes and subconscious did their work in unison. It was one of Nick Carter's methods of working. He let the essence of the little room and its macabre occupant soak into him.

The dead woman, Nick thought, would be in her fifties. Not important. She had been English, probably upper class, probably a sort of remittance woman. Not important. Just another upper-crust Lesbian. She had been pushing dope, for years more than likely, and only recently had the cops cracked down on her. At the insistence of U.S. Narcotics, no doubt. They had hoped to use her to get a lead on someone higher. No dice as of this date. Nick smiled grimly. Certainly no dice now! Probably she had been a double, or had tried to be—playing both sides and hoping to get the best of it for herself.

He stared down at the stout body in the brown tweed skirt and jacket, the man's shirt and tie, the butch haircut. No compassion stirred in him. She had sold the stuff to Mija Gialellis and a thousand kids like her. Leslie Standish had earned her slashed throat!

Nick went back into the tiny bathroom. The acetone smell still bothered him. Why? Damned if he knew. An old gal like Standish would be bound to have girls in and out. Nick shook his head and went through the medicine cabinet. He worked fast now. Time was running out for him. Any moment someone would be knocking on the door. Probably, as soon as the dirty pictures were over, the Turk plainclothes man would be checking. Nick

whistled between his teeth. He didn't particularly want to knock out any Turkish cops—but if he had to he would. That didn't worry him.

He found the small bottle of nail polish remover. It was half empty. He scanned the label. FASTACT. When a girl was in a hurry to get the polish off, no doubt. Made in Chicago. Nick slipped the bottle into his pocket and went back into the office. Time to take off. He'd been pushing his luck as it was.

Nick went around the body to take a final look at the desk. No use trying to go through it, he thought. Standish wouldn't have any really important papers around. She would have been too smart for that. So would the other people—the people who had had her killed. Strictly small potatoes, Leslie Standish. Dead small potatoes now.

The desk top revealed nothing. It was nearly clean, but for a blotter, an ashtray, a telephone. A packet of matches—Nick picked up the shiny little black folder. Gold letters said: *Divan Annex*.

Nick put the matches in his pocket and went toward the door. He thought—Maurice Defarge, offices and suite in Divan Annex. Entire top floor. Important? Maybe—maybe not. A lot of people would be carrying those matches around. We shall see. Time will tell.

N3 was not at all unhappy or displeased as he reached to unlock the door. He cared not a damn that Leslie Standish had been murdered. Even under torture she probably couldn't have told them much.

Nick whistled softly. A thing from the *Threepenny Opera*—*Mack the Knife*.

And Mack was back in town. Or Johnny Ruthless was. This gladdened what the AXE man liked to think of as his heart. He liked to think, too, that his own presence in Istanbul had something to do with Johnny's emergence from retirement.

He was looking forward to meeting Johnny Ruthless!

Nick Carter opened the door and stepped into the dimly lit corridor—and got his wish. There, at the intersecting corner of the two corridors, stood Johnny Ruthless! In dinner jacket, black Homburg, glistening shirt front, a mocking little smile on the thin lips beneath the

dark pencil moustache. He stared at Nick, silent, mocking, poised like a dancer.

Nick Carter let shock and surprise wait until later. With first rapid instinct he raised the Luger, then knew it was no good. Gun fire would bring every cop in town. And he didn't want to kill this man—not yet.

Neither spoke a word. Nick went down the hall in great lunging strides. The man in the dinner jacket did a graceful pirouette, a flowing, sinuous feline movement, and ran for the door at the far end of the hall. The door that led into the court. Nick, following, ran squarely into the trap.

Chapter 7

THE OLDEST PROFESSION

It was the oldest and simplest trap in the world—you chase me and I'll catch you! It worked to perfection.

Both big men were waiting as Nick raced across the intersecting corridor in pursuit of the flitting, elusive figure in the dinner jacket. It was an amateur's mistake and Nick made it and never quite forgave himself for it—but at the time he had only one thought. To get his sinewy hands around the throat of Johnny Ruthless.

The man nearest the corner kicked at Nick's legs as he ran past. Nick went sprawling, knowing even in that racing desperate moment before he hit the floor that he had been tricked. As he fell he turned his head, watching, and saw the remaining man come fast with a short length of cord in his hands. That was it, then! *Thuggee!* They were going to strangle him. Quick and noiseless—and most painful!

Two big men against one big man! As Nick hit the hard splintery floor and rolled over on his back he knew that these men must consider the odds pretty good. So did he. Yet even then, just before the brawl, he knew this was going to be a tough one. Nick had never underestimated an enemy in his life—which was why he was still around.

As the first man leaped to pin him down Nick hooked a foot around the man's calf and kicked hard at the knee with his iron shod heel. A fast way to break a leg. This man slipped away from it, spun, and kicked Carter brutally in the ribs. It hurt. Nick rolled away from the second man, with the cord, who was trying to catch at Nick's ankles with it. Nick kicked him in the face. The man fell sideways, cursing. By now Nick guessed they had orders not to kill him unless they must—the cord was just to choke him into submission. Johnny Ruthless probably had

a few questions in mind. With the amazing computer-like speed of the human brain—even locked in this sweating, grunting, cursing struggle—Nick thought of Dr. Six and the operating table that must be waiting!

Both men smelled of fish. Nick noted this as the largest man came at him in a long stretching dive with gnarled brown hands like talons. They were getting a little more than they had bargained for and Nick could sense their thoughts—they had somehow to tie down this wildcat in the crazy tight suit, use their weight, maul him and smother him.

All this time Nick had the Luger in his right hand. They were ignoring it. They knew he didn't want to use it.

As the diving man came in Nick whipped the Luger against his face, slashing and cutting with it. The thug grunted and instinctively flinched away. Nick whipped him again, back and forth, driving him off as he kept an eye on the fellow with the cord. That was the baby to watch!

The cord man was circling, trying to close, to toss the loop over Nick's head. Nick leaped about a foot in the air, twisted, and tried to get the man with a *savate* kick in the groin. He missed. And slipped as he came down. The man with the cord gave a little grunt of triumph and raised the looped cord, leaping in, at the same time hissing something to his companion.

Nick Carter did three things nearly at once. He was off balance and outnumbered and getting a little tired of the whole mess. Also he was, just a trifle, beginning to weary. The past twenty-four hours had been damned tough.

Nick dropped the Luger. He shifted his feet ever so slightly, like the champion heavyweight boxer he was, and crossed his right to the cordman's chin. The impact of knuckles on flesh and bone sent a flash of pain as high as his elbow. The cordman's knees sagged, he turned with an odd silly expression on his face and began falling.

N3 whirled to see the remaining thug diving for the Luger. He had expected that. It was bait, the Luger.

Nick had only to hold out his arm, straight, with the stiletto pointing like a sixth gleaming metal finger. The man impaled himself on the blade, running on it with a certain crazy eagerness, unable to stop, looking down and watching the sharp steel slide into his guts like a fork into

butter. He ran right up against Nick, this nameless hoodlum already dying, and for a moment they stared into each other's eyes.

There was pain in the Turk's eyes. Pain and total misapprehension about what was happening to him. What could *not* be happening to *him*! His mouth opened and his tongue came out and blood gushed down over a black-stubbed chin. He began to fall slowly. Fall toward Nick, pressing heavier on the stiletto that was killing him, pushing it farther and farther into his stomach.

N3 stepped quickly back. He whipped out Hugo and let the man fall the rest of the way, crashing to the floor, whipping about like a gaffed fish. Nick took a moment to breathe. He looked down at the dying man, still writhing and bubbling blood. In a voice as cold as an Arctic wind Nick said: "See how you like floating around the Horn, you son of a bitch!"

Nick scooped up the Luger and put it away. He snapped the little stiletto back into the arm scabbard and moved for the main corridor. As he rounded it he saw Memet, the cop who was supposed to have been guarding Leslie Standish, coming through the curtains at the far end.

Memet spotted Nick and quickened his pace. Nick saw the wariness in the man as he came toward him. Memet's hand slipped under his jacket to his armpit. Damn it to hell! Couldn't the man have waited one more minute!

N3 knew he must look like Frankenstein after a hard night. This Turk cop was going to be suspicious as hell. Memet was going to ask questions, a lot of questions, and when Memet saw what was around the corner—

Nick went into his act. He staggered and fell against the wall, gesturing to the plainclothes-man, calling out in a croaky voice.

"Imdat! Imdat! Polis! Cabuk gel. Effendim Standish!"

Memet ran toward Nick. In his hand now was a squat, black bulldog revolver. *"Ne? Ne? Nerede?"*

Nick staggered into the cop, clutching at him, twisting between Memet and the bodies in the short corridor. He pointed to the office door. *"Suraya bakin! I but came to deliver a message and this I find. Come! See!"*

Nick grabbed Memet's arm and pulled him along

toward the office door. He kicked it open and pointed with a trembling finger. "*Surada!*"

Memet hissed in surprise. He pulled away from Nick and took an instinctive step into the office, toward the body by the desk. The revolver in his hand dropped.

It was enough. Nick Carter gave the man a violent shove, sent him spinning crazily across the room. Nick slammed the door and turned the old-fashioned key, all in one faster than lightning motion. The key in the office door had been in his mind from the moment he saw the cop.

Nick ducked low, hugging the wall, and ran for the main corridor, knowing what to expect. It came! From the office came a bellow of rage and a nasty fusillade that ripped the door and sprayed murderously down the short hallway. A slug tapped at Nick's padded shoulder as he made the turn into the corridor.

That did it, he thought, as he straightened himself and his tie and brushed at the front of his suit. He had a little blood on him, not much, and though he looked villainous enough it shouldn't matter in a place like *Le Cinema Bleu*. If only there were no *polis* in the immediate vicinity! Memet would be using the phone on Leslie Standish's desk by now—and *Le Cinema* would be ringed by radio cars within minutes. How many minutes was the question—would he and Mousy have time to get away in the Opel? If they were nabbed the mission would be properly screwed. *Fini! Kaput!* Fubar and snafu! They would spend the next month or so in a Turkish prison trying to explain matters.

Nick thought of all these things before he reached the curtains leading into the bar proper. Then he was nearly knocked down as the curtains swirled and the bartender and a group of curious patrons came surging through. They were all talking at once and nobody paid any attention to Nick. In fifteen seconds he was out in the driving cold rain, hot-footing it along a narrow cobbled lane that crooked away up hill toward the *cul-de-sac* where Mousy was waiting in the Opel.

Mousy would be wondering. Probably he had heard the shots. This area was quiet and deserted at night except for the comings and goings of such odd-balls as frequented

Nick came to a soft-footed halt at the corner of the alley. The darkness here was nearly total. Stygian. The only sounds the soft weep of the rain, the gurgle of water in the filthy gutters. Nick wondered if Mousy had fallen asleep. Probably not. The little guy was too nervous for that.

Nick put just the brim of his sodden fedora around the corner and called out: "Mousy? Mousy? It's N3! No trouble! N3, Mousy! Okay?"

Silence. The rain cried a little harder.

"Mousy!"

Nothing.

Nick Carter felt it start then. The superb warning system that was an integral part of him, that had saved his life so many times, began to function. In the back of his brain a little alarm bell began to sound. Danger!

Long ago Nick had learned his bitter lessons. There was a time to freeze and a time to move. This was a time to move. Let the splendid body and the trained mind take over. Act now, think later!

Nick had the Luger cold in his hand as he went around the corner and into the little *cul-de-sac*. He saw the dull glint of the Opel in the clotting tar shadows, heard the drum of rain on the metal roof, kept moving. Kept on moving—not to the car door, not to where something, or someone, sat hunched at the wheel, but on and beyond to the rear of the car. Now down—down flat in the filth and wet of the dirt alley and under the car and squirming back toward the front. Now stopping, listening, flat and making one with the ground near the door of the driver's seat.

Waiting. Listening. Striving to feel and sense what was out there. Who was out there. Around him.

Nick, his face in the mud, allowed himself a cold inward smile. They were there, all right! He knew it as surely as though they had greeted him with lights and shouts and a brass band. He knew who was out there, and why they were out there. What he didn't know was—how many and where hidden? Mousy and he had arrived in the dark and had parked the car and gone straight to *Le Cinema Bleu*. There had been no time, nor thought, to case the alley.

So now N3 lay in the mud beneath the car and wondered about doorways and arches and windows and fences and recesses—any one of which might be concealing his death. But there was a remedy for that—draw fire! Anyway he wanted to know about Mousy. He already knew, to be sure, but he must be positive. And it was as good a way as any to draw fire.

They were being remarkably patient. His swift reaction must have confused them a bit. Nick's lips twisted in something that was half snarl, half sneer. Had they really expected him to come sauntering up to the car and ask for a match?

At that moment a siren wailed, a lost soul calling in the rainy night. Nearby its mate answered. Both were converging rapidly on the vicinity of *Le Cinema Bleu*.

Took them long enough, Nick thought, but this should do it. *They* don't want the police anymore than I do, so if trouble's coming it will come now. And it was coming.

Nick rolled halfway out from under the Opel, reached up and twisted the knob on the driver's side, thrust clawing fingers until they felt cloth. He jerked hard, sliding back under the car as he did so. Something came tumbling out of the car to fall with a sullen *splot* into a puddle beside Nick. He reached, explored rapidly with his free hand—poor little Mousy had taken off that silly dress before they killed him!

Three or four flashlights came on simultaneously. All were beamed from near the entrance of the alley or across the street from it. Two were from doorways there. The hard stalks of light slashed at the Opel. Nick had only time to see the great black gaping slash in Mousy's throat. See how the little man's head flopped. Another throat cut nearly to the backbone!

Nick wriggled rapidly backward as the tommy gun let go from a doorway across from the alley entrance. The front of the Opel exploded in a storm of metal and glass.

He reached the rear of the Opel and stood up, hugging the car. The machine gunner let go another burst from across the street. Slugs crawled over the battered car like leaden lice. Deadly biting lice. Nick held his fire, moulding himself to the car, using every inch of cover.

The machine gunner appeared to be doing all the work.

The others were handling the lights. Nick leaned out and fired rapidly four times with the Luger, liking the vicious kick of the weapon in his hand. Two of the lights went out. A man yelled in pain. Someone cursed in the dark not far from the alley entrance. Nick fired at the sound. The man screamed.

The tommy gun raved again. He moved to the other side of the car and started firing at the lights again. They were nervous now, the lights, moving in erratic zigs and zags as they tried to spot him.

Wilhelmina went empty. Nick reached into his coat pocket for another clip. He heard the sound of leather in mud behind him and whirled. They had planted a man back there!

Steel glistened as the figure came out of the dark at him. Nick went to his knees, the stiletto already in his hand for the upward disemboweling thrust.

The single remaining light splashed on the running man. He flung up an arm, as though to ward off the light—and the bullets that trailed it. Nick heard someone scream a command, but it was too late. The man was blown backward in the hail of lead—running backward with his hands clutching his belly, he fell, still backward, splayed in the mud.

Sirens again. Much closer now. Nick slipped the new clip into the Luger and began firing at random at the alley mouth. The last light fell and rolled into the streaming gutter, still burning. Nick kept firing. They would be going now, without saying goodbye.

Silence. Then, somewhere down the street, came the nervous rasp of a starter. An engine roared. Tires screamed.

More silence. Nick reloaded the Luger a third time and stepped carefully out from behind the shredded Opel. Run, do not walk, to the nearest exit!

Too late! Two police cars, one from each direction, squealed to a halt at the entrance to the *cul-de-sac*. The scene was bathed in garish white light. Nick saw a body lying in a gutter, washed around by dirty foaming water. Good! At least one. And a body would keep the cops occupied for a time. As would the Opel and the other body behind him, the man who had been shot by mistake.

Now all he had to do was get out of this bag he was in. Sooner or later, probably sooner, the cops would stop gabbling among themselves and start searching. Nick darted to a wall of the alley and started working his way back. Farther and farther into the trap that might have an escape hatch—and might not.

The Turkish police acted with speed and efficiency and Nick Carter found himself cursing them for it. They had gotten a blazing high-powered spot light into operation and it opened up the black throat of the alley like a white lancet. N3's luck was in. He had stumbled and fallen over a pile of debris just as the light went on. Now he lay and cursed fervently, pressing his face into some particularly noisome garbage, while the long bright finger poked around him.

For once Nick found himself not damning his suit, which up to now he had considered the work of a demented Turk tailor. It was of a crappy brown color and, when smeared with garbage as it now was, it provided perfect camouflage. He lay unmoving, his face buried in filth, and the light passed over him without any hesitation. When it passed Nick cocked one eye and followed the white beam as it traversed on down the alley. What he saw did not bring any great joy to his heart. It was a dead end, all right. The alley ended in a short flight of shallow wide stairs leading up to houses—at least he counted three or four doors before the light went out.

Nick waited five minutes or so, listening to the shouts and commands as the police worked around the shot up Opel. They would get around to searching the alley, but he had a few minutes grace. What to do with it? He could think of only one way out—so that would have to be it. It would mean laying a fresh trail, perhaps starting the chase all over again, but there was no choice. He would have to go through one of those houses. Whether the residents liked it or not!

N3 carefully began to crawl on his hands and knees up that sewer of an alley, that reeking cloaca of old Istanbul. He plodded on—*squish*—*squash*—shaking his hand out of a nasty mess of something, thinking that at least he couldn't get any cruddier than he now was. No man could.

At last he reached the stairs. The very end of the dead end. He judged it safe to stand erect now. The cops were still clustered around the Opel at the far end.

Nick reached the top of the stairs. Three doors were set into a blank facing brick wall. No windows. He moved lightly, testing and feeling. The first door—locked.

N3 thought of simply kicking it in and barging right on through and out into the street beyond, then thought not. Why raise a fuss until it was necessary? It would be a damned shame to end up in an Istanbul jail after all he'd been through!

Second door—locked.

Third door—it opened just as he was reaching for the knob. A female voice said: "*Effendim! You come in, no? You come in, Effendim. Evet? I make nice for you.*"

"*Evet,*" said Nick Carter, a trifle wearily. "*Evet. I will come in. But you will not have to make it nice for me. I will make it nice for you—with many Turkish pounds if you will show me a way out of here.*"

Nick slipped through the door and closed it behind him. He leaned against it and glanced rapidly around. From long habit, this, for surely there could be no danger

ie.
Unless you counted his hostess—*she* might be dangerous in the proper, or improper, circumstances. She was short and fat and very brown. Her hair was thick and greasy. She had a large splayed nose and quite a few warts and moles. Her eyes were bright and shiny black, now fixed on him in happy anticipation. This, Nick thought with an inner shudder, surely must be one of the free-lances! No police department in its right mind would give her a license—not if they cared anything about the reputation of their city.

The woman smiled and Nick saw that she was toothless. She came toward him, holding out her hand. "*Back-sheesh! Lutfen oturunuz.*"

Nick handed her a sheaf of pound notes, without letting her see the wad in his pocket. He looked around for another door and saw none. There was a window covered with a heavy drape. He went to it, pulled back the drape and opened the window. A terrible smell came into the room.

Nick Carter, not for the first time that night, was truly disgusted. He swore softly to himself, then turned to the woman. She gave him a toothless smile and started to undress. Nick held up a hand. "Yok!"

She already had her blouse off. Nick regarded the pendulous dugs with something akin to illness. He pointed to the window and asked if it were the only way out.

The woman nodded brightly. She told him the sewer was down there—the big sewer that flowed into the Horn. She seemed puzzled—Why was *Effendim* so interested in sewers?

"Thank you," Nick told her. "You have saved my life. Anyway my liberty. You are truly a daughter of Fatima. Goodbye."

Nick began to climb out the window. It was probably a long drop down to the slough but it wouldn't hurt him. It would be—soft.

The daughter of Fatima gazed after this crazy *Effendim* in puzzlement.

The *Effendim* let go and fell twenty feet into what the French call *merde*. It sounds a little like murder—and it is!

Chapter 8

TURKISH DELIGHT

From certain suites in the Hotel Hilton in Istanbul it is possible to look south through the gardens to Taksim Square. The view is fine and clear, especially if the trees in the gardens are not yet in full leaf—and if one has a pair of powerful glasses.

Mr. Grover Stout of Indianapolis, Indiana, had such a pair of glasses. German made binoculars, the best and most powerful in the world. Mr. Stout sat on his sun balcony now and used them to sweep the vista to the south. Mr. Stout evinced no interest in the Taksim Gardens or the pretty shop-girls and secretaries who were strolling there on their lunch hour. Mr. Stout was watching the Divan Annex, a brand new apartment house which stood very close indeed to the Divan Hotel which had been a landmark in Istanbul for many years.

He was thinking, a little petulantly, that they might have built the damned Annex a little lower than the hotel itself, instead of a good ten feet higher! It was going to present problems. He had already ascertained that it was going to be next to impossible to get into the offices of the Defarge Exporting Co., Ltd., in the normal manner. Without being noticed too much, which he certainly did not want. He did not want to be noticed at all! But Defarge, Ltd., was security minded. A little too much so, perhaps. The firm employed the services of a private detective agency which furnished armed guards. Passes were required for all personnel. The excuse was that a great deal of money was kept on the premises at all times.

Perhaps, thought Mr. Stout now as he scanned the upper façade of the Divan Annex. And perhaps there were other reasons.

Mr. Stout noted, with an odd expression of pleasure on

his round ruddy features, that the security guard had been doubled today at Defarge, Ltd. His powerful glasses looked right into the main corridor on the top floor and he could see that there were two uniformed guards on duty today. Normally, or so he had been informed, there was only one. Mr. Stout smiled placidly, very much in his role. Had the cat been after the goldfish, perhaps?

Mr. Stout smiled again, benignly, as befitted a man of his age, background and amplitude. He had news for Defarge, Ltd.! The water was going to get a lot muddier!

Mr. Stout switched his gaze from the Annex to the Divan Hotel next door. The two buildings, old and new, were separated by a gap of only about fifteen feet. Not insurmountable, thought Mr. Stout with a sigh. He had, in his younger days, been known to leap almost that far. It would be a lead pipe cinch—downward going! But that bastard of an architect, whoever he was Allah curse him, had built the Annex half a floor higher! It was going to present problems.

Mr. Stout sighed again and lit a cigar, a round fat oily Corona that cost a dollar and a half at the stand in the lobby. He hated round fat cigars—but Mr. Grover Stout of Indianapolis smoked them. He lit up, made a face, and put the glasses to his slightly myopic eyes. A few drops now and then did *that* trick—and the heavy glasses he wore completed the illusion.

told." Mr. Stout's voice was hard. "This isn't just a silly game, you know! Anytime you think it is just remember Mousy!"

A shadow crossed her lovely face. "Poor little Mousy. I am so sorry—he keep me away from them and save my life and now he . . ."

Mr. Stout patted her knee. "Forget Mousy. He's dead. I want to keep you alive. It's not going to be easy as it is—so don't make it any tougher."

N3 had already, to a certain extent and in a certain manner, forgotten Charles "Mousy" Morgan. When a soldier is killed by your side in battle you do not linger to mourn the corpse!

Mr. Stout allowed his lecherous nature to take over. He fingered the girl's shiny nylon leg above the knee. The flesh beneath the stocking was wonderfully soft-firm. Mija's skirt was very short, in the current mode, and Mr. Stout's hand had free play. Mija leaned against him, her firm breasts pressed against his cheek. Suddenly she shivered and clamped her knees together on his hand. "You are a nasty old man! You get me excite and then you can do nothings!"

Mr. Stout grinned. "I might surprise you, baby doll! For all you know I might have a *harem* back in Indianapolis."

Mija giggled. She disengaged herself from his hand and stood up, smoothing down her skirt. "You will not need a *harem*, old fat one! I am all the *harem* you will need—if ever we have a chance!"

She stretched, her arms over her head, pulling her taut young breasts hard against the thin stuff on her blouse. Mr. Stout, looking at the tender little buds her nipples made on the cloth, was inclined to agree with her. Patience was, at times, a virtue hard to come by.

He followed her back into the suite, drink in hand. Seen upright, with his wrinkled linen trousers over a fat behind, the garish sport shirt worn outside his pants, the black and white shoes with perforated toes, Mr. Grover Stout was something of an artistic creation. Close to perfection—this middle-aged hick from Indiana, this aging Pan who was having a last fling before returning to the wife and kiddies. Even the flat, nasal accent was right,

along with the bumbling *gaucheries*. Mr. Stout was all check book and big stupid heart. Mr. Stout and his pretty little Turkish trollop who had checked into the Hilton shortly after ten that morning.

Nick Carter patted his rubber belly in contentment as he watched Mija's *svelte* little fanny sway into the living room where a pile of bundles and parcels lay in the middle of the floor. Stout and doxy, he thought, wouldn't play for long, wouldn't hold up forever—the enemy was too murderously keen for that—but for now it was working. Twenty-four hours was all he needed!

Now he watched from a sofa as the girl, on her knees among the parcels, tore them open with the undisguised glee of a child on Christmas morning. Frocks, suits, stockings by the dozen, dainty underwear of every shade, girdle and garter belts—even a fur piece.

He said, "I see you've been obeying orders. Buying out the shops in the lobby. You've been sufficiently loud and vulgar about it, I hope."

Mija nodded. "I have been, yes. I almost drive the sales people from their minds. I charge everything to you in a loud tone."

Mr. Stout nodded. "Good. That's what we want. A smoke screen. From the bottom of the cave to the top of the Hilton. They'll be looking somewhere in the middle."

His words to Hawk early that morning, over the scrambler phone in the Hole, had been: "I've got a plan, sir, but to put it into effect I've got to get out of this hole. I've been low—I'm going high. Fast. I'll need unlimited funds."

Hawk did not hesitate. The news of Mousy's death had not upset him—nothing short of an atomic blast on Pennsylvania Avenue could do that—but his voice was like broken glass as he said, "You've got it. You had it, anyway, you know. You heard what the man said—the entire resources of this country. What else do you want and what are you going to do with all this—if I may ask?"

"I really can't tell you, sir, because I don't exactly know myself. My plan is sketchy. I'm going to play it by ear, by guess and by God. I think boldness is the answer—boldness and speed. Things can't go any worse than they have been. I'm going to stop that! Now I want a switch

over to Ankara, sir. I think I'd better talk to them myself."

Nick had talked to Ankara for half an hour. He explained in meticulous detail what he wanted and how he wanted it done. This done he was switched back to Hawk.

"I'm taking the girl and cutting out now, sir. Ankara is sending two men to take over here. Old Bici will hold things down until they get here."

"You think it's wise to take the girl?"

Nick grinned at the phone. He knew Hawk wasn't being moralistic this time—it was a legitimate doubt.

"Ordinarily no, sir, but this time yes. For one thing I want to keep her alive—and since Narcotics here is a shambles just now I'd have to hand her back to the Turkish police. They'd try, but they wouldn't have the interest I do. Besides I think she might be able to help me—she speaks most of the Anatolian dialects, I don't. And I need her for the cover I'm establishing. That most of all. Really, sir, I think I'd better keep her with me."

"Okay. You're running the show. You'll be listening to Singing Sam, of course?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tune into the barber. Goodbye, sir."

"Goodbye, son. Stay alive."

Mija was holding up a sheer pair of black panties. "You like, Daddykins?" She winked at him and made a face.

It was probably unnecessary—Nick had searched the suite thoroughly upon their arrival—but a role was a role, a cover had to be played all the way.

"Daddy likes," he smirked. "Daddy would love to see his baby doll in them. Go and put them on for Daddy." He gave her a lecherous smirk.

"Later," said baby doll. She held up a tiny scarlet Bikini. "This is how you say—cute? I think I will go try it in the pool, no?"

"Yes," said Mr. Stout. "A good idea. I'll come along and watch." He sure as hell couldn't join her, Nick thought. He'd look damned funny swimming in fanny pads and rubber belly, not to mention a bald wig that might or might not stay on in the water.

So he watched that afternoon as the girl swam and

went off the high board. Soon everyone at the pool was watching. Not only was Mija a sleek skinned, phocine beauty in the brief scarlet, she was also a terrific diver. Before long there was a ripple of applause after each perfectly executed dive. This Mr. Stout did not like. As soon as he decently could, he got her out of there. Mija did not demur. She understood. Too much attention was not good. When they got back to the suite she was still flushed and happy with her little triumph.

From the bathroom she called to Mr. Stout, who was fixing himself a weak scotch and gazing out over the balcony to where the westing sun was laying a golden carpet on the Horn.

"You see I do not lie when I say I am good athlete," Mija said from the shower.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Stout. "You are. I was impressed."

It was true. She was good. But he had been impressed with something else, too. With so prosaic a thing as the diving board Mija had used! A diving board!

Mr. Stout took his drink to the little balcony. He watched the last rays of the sun strike sparks from the windows of the Divan Hotel and the Annex. For a moment the windows were golden, gleaming, fiery eyes. Mr. Stout regarded the two buildings with an air of abstraction, but behind the phony features a mind was racing like a computer. A diving board! A children's play area. A trampoline.

Mr. Stout smiled and sipped at his drink. It could be—it just could work!

"Daddykins?"

Mr. Stout winced and turned back into the suite. It would have sounded bad enough from an American chorus girl—from a Turkish girl it sounded just plain ridiculous. It was time, he thought, to knock it off for a while. Time for a breather. He would take it as read that this was, for the moment at least, a safe house. Time to relax for a couple of hours. He couldn't operate until well after dark in any case. He felt sanguine and sure of himself, but you never knew. Death could be out there in the twilight now, gathering itself for the assault.

There was a time for Death—and it would come when

it would come! N3 knew that. Had always known it. Accepted it. Nothing to be done about it.

There was a time for Love—the bitter-sweet antidote to Death. A time for holding and grasping and sensing the depths of another human being. Of being not alone, not afraid. A time of brief forgetting, of taking with fervor what was freely given. Call it love, call it passion, call it sex and call it carnal—still it summoned and must be obeyed.

"Daddy! Come here to doll baby, please."

Nick stepped into the bedroom. He left Mr. Stout on the threshold and closed the door. "You can drop that stuff now," he told her. "Just keep your voice down and we can talk normally. I think this room is safe—I'd swear it. Anyway we'll take a chance."

Mija was sitting on the huge bed clad in nothing but black bra and panties. "Praise Allah," she giggled. "I feel like so much the fool. Now for a time we can be nature—normal? How you say it?"

Nick had to grin. "Don't knock the play-acting," he said. "Sometimes it means life or death—but I agree with you now, it's time for a break." He went close to the bed and leered down at her in his best fat man's manner. "A love break, eh, baby?"

He bent to kiss her. Mija pulled away, covering her mouth with her hand to choke back laughter. "No! I ~~will~~ not make love with a fat old man! Go and take ~~it~~ ~~off~~ please."

Nick stood by the bed, arms akimbo, looking down at her with mock anger. "So you're a tease! A ~~good~~ ~~tease~~ You don't care anything about me—all you ~~want~~ ~~is~~ ~~money~~."

"That is right," said Nick. He smiled down at her, lingering a moment, feeling his sense being flogged to action by the sensual impact of her. She lay splayed on the bed, the black bra and panties mere filmy shadows across the gold-cream nakedness of her. Her hair was short black-silk on the pillow, her face in the dusk an oval with a crimson flower for a mouth. Mija looked up at him, unsmiling now, her lashes hooding the great long brown eyes.

"*Cabuk* darling. *Daha cabuk!*"

When Nick came out of the bathroom more dusk had gathered in the room. He saw a filmy pile of black beside the bed. He approached and stood beside her. "Asleep?"

Mija looked at him a long time before she answered. Then, very softly, she said, "You are beautiful. So beautiful."

"Not many people call me that," Nick said. "They call me a great many things, but not that. From you I accept it as a compliment." He sank onto the bed beside her.

She stroked the great muscles with her fingertips. "You are a great monster, you know. Not at all like the other one—Mr. Stout? What is happen to him?"

Nick kissed her breasts. Both peaks were rigid. He slid his mouth across hers in a soft kiss. Her lips clung to his, moist, eager.

"Mr. Stout went home to Indiana," he told her. "He's a respectable married man with two kids. This is not for him."

Mija clung to him, pressing her breasts to his face. "You are a big fool when you wish to be. I—I am a fool also. A different kind of fool."

Nick kissed her ear. "What kind?"

He could barely hear her whisper. "The worst kind—I think perhaps I am fall in love with you."

Nick shook his head without taking his mouth from hers. "Don't! Never do that. Worst mistake a girl can make."

He could feel her trembling. Her flesh was hot against his and he could hear the pounding of her heart beneath the tender plum-smooth flesh of her left breast. Her fragrance, compounded of fragile perfume and the musk odor of an excited woman, enveloped him. This, he knew,

was going to be good. By this time he well knew the connection between danger and sex, at least in himself. The blend made a raging stallion of him. Sex just before he put his life on the line was sex at its best.

They kissed for a long time. Their tongues were melding now. Mija arched her back, bowing her long spine into a curving bridge, trembling and shaking and gasping. She forgot her English and lapsed into soft Turkish. Her hands were avid for his muscular body. His big hands found out every secret of her soft one. Then at last they were one and the beautiful and terrible battle began. Together they savaged each other and the wide bed—on and on and on. As though this meeting of flesh in the night should never end.

Mija began to weep. "*Daha cabuk,*" she sobbed. "*Daha cabuk!* Faster!"

Nick had forgotten everything in the universe but this red cave into which he must plunge deeper and deeper. He struggled frantically on now in love-hate and tender-hurt with a terrible obsession to cleave and rend and utterly subdue her.

Mija squealed like a proud Arabian mare that had been conquered at last.

Half an hour later Nick awoke from a light slumber. Mija was lost in heavy dreams beside him. Nick took the Luger from beneath the pillow—she had not suspected its presence—and went into the bathroom. He glanced at his watch. Nearly time to listen to Singing Sam.

He took his electric razor from its case. Then an electric toothbrush which he despised and never used, but which made a splendid antenna. Old Poindexter, of Special Effects, said it added at least two thousand miles to the razor-radio's effective range. Nick smiled to himself. They would see now. He seldom used the razor gadget—but now it was the only contact he would have with Hawk for a time. And that would be one way. Nick could only listen, not reply.

He adjusted a tiny, nearly invisible knob on the razor, twiddling with it a moment. He hooked the electric toothbrush into the circuit—a tiny jack into a miniscule hole. A metallic buzzing came from the razor. Nick put it to his ear and listened. A miniature storm of static roared in his ear

for a moment, then Hawk's voice came through clearly. Nick glanced at his watch again. Right on the nose!

Hawk's voice was small but perfectly clear, as though a doll was talking in a lucid, flowing, and very tiny voice.

Nick Carter sat on the toilet seat and listened. He was naked, stripped of all makeup, six feet of muscular bomb that could explode at any moment. As he listened to Hawk's voice crackle on and on his facial expression changed ever so slightly. The fine high brow creased and the lean face tightened over the good bone structure. Jaw muscles bunched beneath the flat, close to the head ears. For just a fleeting moment N3 looked like a death's head. Then he relaxed, sighed, and flicked off the razor-radio.

Nick was disturbed, deeply disturbed by what he had heard. Part of what Hawk had said might be helpful—another part had torn a large chunk out of his world.

N3 slid off the toilet seat to the floor and assumed the primary yoga position. He must think this out. He breathed deeply, pulling the flat muscle banded belly into arching concavity. Slowly he entered a state of semi-trance. His breathing slacked off to a mere whisper.

As he drifted inward, into the adyta of innermost being, Nick asked one question.

"Why, Mousy? Goddamnit—why?"

THE FAT MAN

There was a gibbous moon, just past the half, and the e radiance produced in turn a great many shadows up the Divan Hotel. There was the larger shadow of a lf completed structure—it did seem to be a penthouse ing up—and there were the many smaller shadows of ter tower, elevator machinery housing, and the chil- en's playground. There was also one tall, angular, wide- ouldered shadow that was as silent and unmoving as the hers. For a good half hour this latter shadow stood ithout movement and watched the gold glowing rectang- s that were the windows of Defarge & Co., Ltd.

There were only three lighted windows now. The pri- te suite of Maurice Defarge himself, the watcher pre- med. Very private indeed. He had seen an armed guard aking his tour of the empty offices. The man did a orough job, but when he reached a short flight of stairs eading up to a single door he stopped. Beyond that, the atcher thought now with a dry little smile, would be the rivate domain of Maurice Defarge. Where a fat, sick old pider lay in bed and continued to spin webs.

That privacy would be invaded tonight!

At last N3 moved from the shadows into the moon- ight. Moved lightly, as stealthy as a ghost. He wore black ousers, very tight fitting, black sneakers and a black weat shirt. He was bare headed and his close-cropped hair as stained a darker hue than usual. But it was the face at had undergone the most striking change. Here was nothing of the lecherous, late and unlamented Mr. Stout, nor of the real Nick Carter. These were Mongol features—a pale saffron skin, slant eyes, flat nose. Here, indeed was a Chinese gentleman skulking among the shadows atop the Divan Hotel.

ows again to watch. If he had been spotted building his little toy there should be some reaction soon. While he waited he checked his weapons: the Luger was in his belt, the stiletto in its sheath along his forearm. And this time he had brought along Pierre, the little gas pellet. At the moment he planned to kill the fat man with the stiletto, but then you never knew.

When the all-clear sounded in his brain, N3 went to the roof coping without hesitation. From long experience he knew that the trick of going into hazard was to go fast and without hesitation. Faltering, second thoughts, only got you into trouble. You took every precaution, you tried to do everything right—and then you took your chances.

Nick walked out on the plank. It was, he thought with the wry twist of humor he could always summon, a little like walking the plank at that. If he missed and did the Deep Six they would be scraping him up with a shovel!

He bounced tentatively a couple of times. The plank was springy enough, a live thing beneath him. He glanced back at the pile of cement bags—they were holding firmly enough. He reached the end of the plank and stood poised. He looked up. A good eight feet, maybe more. He would have to work up to it gradually.

Slowly, carefully, Nick began to bounce on the plank. Each time a little higher. He forgot the void below him. He forgot everything but the task in hand—to reach that roof beckoning above and away from him. He had one chance, one shot at it. No repeats.

Now! Nick came down on the plank with all his weight, stiff legged, then sprang up with the greatest thrust he could muster. His hands together over his head, a dark arrow shot upward in the pale moonlight.

He fell short! Short of what he had hoped for. His fingers touched the tile coping, clawing, beginning to slip off the smooth surface. He had hoped to get at least one arm *over* the coping. Now he dangled in space and his fingers were slipping—slipping.

Months or years before some Turkish mason had been careless. He had installed a broken tile and had neglected to fill in the crevice with mortar in proper fashion. This saved Nick Carter's life now. His fingers clawed into the

Nick had acted on the tip from Hawk over radio. It appeared that the long, long finger extended even into this Turkish pie. N3 did not see immediately how to exploit it. This game make it just a bit easier to extract information from man—before he killed him.

With soft padding steps N3 went to the roof and stood looking across at the Annex, the architect again. The distance across wasn't twelve feet. One of the planks scattered about completed penthouse would have sufficed for was the fact that the Annex was a good eight or higher than the hotel itself. That was the pro

N3 stared down into the dark void between buildings. He whistled softly between his floors. A hell of a fall if he missed! Might be grinned and the tape at the corners of his eyes, them into slant, plucked at his flesh. Might be would be fatal. So don't miss!

Nick went to work telling himself that it was It was, but it was all he had, and nutty sometimes.

He found the plank he wanted and carried it roof edge, balancing it on the coping. It was thick and, had the roofs been level, he could have across. N3 sighed. Nothing came easy in this

He went back into the shadows around the and found the stack of cement bags. Each one a pounds. Nick bent, tensed and groaned just a b walked back to the coping with a bag under each. The night was cool but he found himself sweating. This was turning out to be work.

He arranged the long plank over the coping to support then put one of the cement bags on it as anchor. He back for more cement bags. In five minutes he had diving board arranged to his liking. Diving board Chinese gentleman grinned. A diving board with a He was going to dive up. He hoped. Nick glanced at the ground nine stories down and whistled again. had better dive up!

When everything was ready he retired into the

ows again to watch. If he had been spotted building his little toy there should be some reaction soon. While he waited he checked his weapons: the Luger was in his belt, the stiletto in its sheath along his forearm. And this time he had brought along Pierre, the little gas pellet. At the moment he planned to kill the fat man with the stiletto, but then you never knew.

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Months or years before some Turkish mason had been careless. He had installed a broken tile and had neglected to fill in the crevice with mortar in proper fashion. This saved Nick Carter's life now. His fingers clawed into the

cracked tile, gripped, steeled like the great talons of an eagle—and held.

For the space of a breath he dangled thus, held back from death only by his great and prehensile grip. Four fingers between him and the hard pavement of the area far below.

Then he had his other hand up and over, swinging his acrobat's body over the coping with a fluid sure motion.

Nick stood looking down at the void for a moment. He grinned slightly. A faint sound came from his lips. A sound that might have been Whewwwww.

Rapidly he moved into the shadow of a chimney and stood waiting for alarms. None came. After a few minutes he went back to the roof edge and studied the roof of the Hotel Divan, below him now. His restless, roving, all seeing eyes spotted the children's playground, lined it up with where he now stood. At last he nodded in satisfaction. His back trail was open. There would be a way out of the burrow.

Nick paused to check his weapons once more, then went softly toward the little hut that housed the elevator machinery. The door was locked, as he had expected. The lock was absurdly simple and Nick did not even resort to his Lockpicker's Special—a celluloid collar stay did the job in thirty seconds.

He went down spiraling iron stairs to another door. This one was unlocked and opened on a landing from which fire stairs led downward. Opposite the landing was a frosted glass door. Through that, as Nick knew from his surveillance with the binoculars, was a short corridor leading into the main offices of Defarge, Ltd. At the far end of the offices were the stairs leading into Maurice Defarge's private suite.

Somewhere between Nick and that suite would be the armed guard!

Nick went cat-footed across the landing, careful that his shadow did not fall on the frosted glass door. He listened. A faint sound of music crept through the door. Music? Then he guessed it. The guard was bored with his long vigil. The guard had brought along a transistor radio for company. Nick nodded in approval. The music would locate the man for him.

Nick eased the door open just a crack. A mouse could not have been more stealthy. He peered in. The man was seated at a desk, about half down the central corridor between rows of desks. The man's back was to Nick. He was eating from a tin lunch bucket as he listened to the small radio.

So it would have to be a stalk!

Nick knew that if you watch an animal, or a man, long enough it will sense your presence. He wasted no time. At the last possible moment, when Nick was just behind him the guard turned with instinctive nervousness. Nick chopped him across the back of the neck with the edge of his hand, not hard enough to kill, and caught the slumping figure as it slid out of the chair.

Now he worked with great speed. He took a roll of tape from his pocket and bound the guard's wrists and ankles. He stuffed a handkerchief into the man's mouth and taped it shut. He took the man's revolver from its holster, emptied the chambers and put the shells in his pocket, then put the revolver back in the holster. Then he shoved the unconscious man into the capacious knee-hole of the desk and left him.

N3 walked blithely to the stairs leading into Maurice Defarge's suite. As he bounded up them his smile was grim and even beneath the Mongoloid makeup Hawk would have recognized his number One boy on a death mission. It was time, Nick thought, as he tried a padded leather door at the top of the stairs—it was time to begin repaying a few debts! Fat man—you are first!

But there was a little play-acting to be done first, too. Hawk had hinted that it might just work. If the CIA had the right information—and Hawk said a CIA man had died in China to get said information—then the Chinese Reds were moving in on the Syndicate! Play it that way, Hawk had said. So N3 would play it that way—at first.

N3 went softly down a short, thick carpeted hallway and stood looking into the bedroom. It was very quiet in the suite. He had locked the leather door behind him. They were alone—just he and the fat man now reading in bed.

Nick did not announce himself at once. He stood in a patch of shadow and studied the room and the man in

bed. There was a faint medicinal smell in the air, tinged with what might be incense. On a bedside table was an array of medicines—bottles, glasses, a spoon, a box of pills. Nick recalled that this fat man had a serious heart condition. He smiled without a trace of mirth. That heart condition was due to get much worse before long!

Maurice Defarge wore tent size magenta pajamas. Nick counted four chins and stopped. The man was a great tub of flab that surrounded and bound him like moulded custard. He had a full head of crisp silvery hair, cut *en brosse*, above a flaccid doughy face. The nose alone was distinctive—it was a parrot's beak, jutting sharp and hooked over a stingy little mouth, a pale and anus-like mouth. Crumpled and shapeless now because of the absence of teeth. Nick saw the teeth in a glass of water on the bedside table.

N3 stepped softly into the room, careful not to get into the full glare of the bedside lamp. His disguise had been hasty and improvised—best not test it too far.

"Good evening," said Nick in crisp Chinese. "I am sorry to come on you so suddenly, but I thought it best that our first meeting be in complete secrecy."

The fat man started and dropped his book. His hand slid under a pillow. His pale eyes, hooded by fat, stared at Nick in alarm. "Who—who are you? What do you want?"

Nick smiled. Gun under the pillow, he noted. He said: "Gori!"

Now he would know. Know if the death of the CIA man had been worth while. Gori, the name of Stalin's birthplace, was supposed to be the password for this operation. So said Hawk—so said the CIA.

The fat man relaxed visibly. He kept his hand under the pillow, but the little mouth creased in an attempt at a smile. "Gori," he said. "You scared me half to death, sir. Bad for me, too. I've a very bad heart. Couldn't you have had yourself announced properly? There's a guard on duty out there and—" A new wariness flashed across the fat face. "You *did* see the guard?"

N3 nodded. Quite truthfully he answered, "I saw him." He spoke Chinese.

The fat man looked irritable. "I don't speak much

Chinese. They know that! Can't you speak Turkish—or French?"

Nick shook his head. "English, sir?"

Defarge nodded. "English, then. Now what do you want? I am a very sick man! Anyway I, we, hadn't expected you so soon. And why are you in Istanbul? That could be dangerous. Most unwise! Especially right now. We're having a lot of trouble here—if you people are suspected it will only make it worse!"

Nick smiled and bowed slightly. He was in—for the moment. If he could get the information he was after the easy way, good. If not—there was always the stiletto!

"We have heard something of your difficulty," he told the fat man. "The Americans again, of course. Those dung turtles! But you seem to be handling matters well enough—not that it is any concern of ours. You know what we want." As he spoke he watched the fat man carefully, trying to see the effect of his words. Knowing as little as he did of this setup it would be easy to slip.

So far Defarge seemed to have accepted him as genuine. This, Nick knew, was simply because the fat man had been taken off guard and had not yet had time to think. Plus the fact that he had been expecting either a Chinese, or someone representing them. Nick knew he would have to push matters while he could.

"We must know the date and route of the next opium convoy," he told the man bluntly. "It is most essential that we know this. You will oblige, please. At once. I had better not stay too long."

Maurice Defarge struggled to sit up in bed. "I don't understand this at all," he complained. "We made an agreement—to sell you the entire apparatus for ten million Turkish pounds! We've only had a million out of you people so far! Anyway the agreement was that this last shipment belonged to us—your people not to take over, or bother us, until the fall! What about that?"

Nick shrugged and smiled, keeping in the shadows. "Things change rapidly, sir. I do not understand myself all that goes on—I only obey orders. Those orders were to see you and obtain the date and the route of the next opium shipment. You will tell me now, please?"

Maurice Defarge lost his temper. He struggled farther

—you—” He rolled over on the bed, clawing at his throat. Nick Carter watched, his face as impassive as though he were actually Chinese.

The fat man stopped breathing. He gave a final grunting sob and a great bubble appeared from the flaccid lips. The bubble hung for a moment, swaying and rippling. The bubble burst.

Nick stepped to the bed. He pressed back an eye-lid with a thumb. A blank orb stared up at him. Nick closed the eye and started to pull the cover over the dead man, then thought better of it. Leave everything just as it was. A natural death. Defarge had a long history of heart trouble. He could have spilled the medicine himself in his last agony. Yes, N3 thought with a grim chuckle. A natural death. Or was it! They will be wondering—and anything that confuses them is good.

He went swiftly to work. Fifteen minutes later he was convinced there was nothing in the suite itself that was of value to him. It figured. This outfit was clever, much too clever, to leave anything incriminating around.

Narcotics and the Turkish cops had tried to bug the place, tried to search it without detection—and they had failed. He wouldn't do any better.

There remained the ornate bathroom. He wasn't going to find anything there but he had to look.

Urfa, Nick was thinking. Urfa and the Edessa pass in three days. The dying man had probably been telling the truth. Almost certainly. When you are in the final throes you do not have time to think up lies. So now he knew. For once on this mission, where he was going next. What he was going to do next. Upcoming—one hell raid!

So now for a fast look at the bathroom and then on his way. He had stored too long now pushing his luck.

bugged by the smell of acetone. It *meant* something! He was sure of that. But what?

He opened the white medicine cabinet, sure of what he would find.

There it was. The little bottle of nail polish remover. Fastact. Made in Chicago. Same as that he'd found at *Le Cinema*, in the bathroom of the murdered Standish woman.

Nick slipped the bottle in his pocket. No time to puzzle over it now. It was time for one phony Red Chinese agent to vanish—completely and forever. He took a final look around the suite and headed for the door.

He opened the padded leather door—and there she was. The blonde from *Le Cinema Bleu*. Marion Talbot. Defarge's secretary. She had a tiny automatic in her hand and it was pointed straight at Nick's belly. Behind her was the uniformed guard, revolver in hand.

Think fast, Mr. Carter!

Mr. Carter thought and acted at the same time. With incredible speed. He would have liked to put the collar on the willowy blonde and asked some pertinent questions at leisure, but the guard ruined that project. Probably had a few rounds in his pocket, Nick thought even as he was going into action. Black mark for me. Careless.

He kicked the little gun out of the blonde's hand and grabbed her in the same quicksilver motion. He kept her between himself and the guard, using her soft, fragrant body as a shield. The guard backed away, revolver at the ready, looking for an opening.

The girl fought silently except for a hissing noise. She clawed at Nick's face. He picked her up and threw her bodily at the guard. He went backward over a desk, the girl on top of him in a froth of skirts and pink underwear and black elastic and dazzling white thigh.

Nick ran like a thief. Great bounding kangaroo leaps that took him down the office and across the landing and up the iron stairs to the roof before they could disentangle themselves. He had a very good idea that the guard wouldn't shoot at him—the girl wouldn't let him. She wouldn't want the police anymore than Nick did. She was in on this deal somehow—no matter what Mousy had said!

He gained the roof, lined himself up with a certain spot on the tile coping and ran for it at full speed. He went out and over into the void in a smooth sailing dive. Midway down he twisted into position for a perfect fireman's fall. He would land on his back, clutching his knees, a compact ball of muscle and bone.

If no one had moved the trampoline!

They hadn't. Nick hit it squarely, bounced high, twisted erect and came down to bounce once more, then from the canvas to the roof top. He lit running.

By the time the guard and the girl reached the roof of the Annex Apartments nothing was to be seen on the adjacent roof but the silent and motionless moon shadows.

Chapter 10

THE WOLF IN THE FOLD

Nick Carter and Mija Gialellis left from Yesilkoy Airport in the small hours of the morning. He had roused her from the soft bed at the Hilton—a bed still redolent of passion—and hustled her unmercifully. Mija did not complain—she was too sleepy. Now, in slacks and a bush jacket, wearing a tawny little trenchcoat and a dark red beret ornamented with the silver pin Nick had given her, she slept with her head on N3's shoulder as the AXE plane droned through the night.

There was not much time. They must be dropped with the dawn and find cover before the sun came up. If it came up. The forecasts, including Turkish, U.S., and 's own were uniformly bad. Nick sat quietly smoking and pondered what lay ahead of him.

Southeast by east from Istanbul, roughly 600 miles, lies some of the roughest and most treacherous country in the world. In this irregular triangle formed by the sourcing Tigris and Euphrates rivers the earth was badly plowed by the Gods and then forgotten. It is a lonely desolation of towering mountains and unscalable cliffs and narrow gorges that twist and intertwine like giant intestines.

This wild and forbidding country, long forsaken by Allah, is cherished only by its kindred souls, the Kurdish tribesmen. They are as wild as the mountains—and much more deadly.

Nick and Mija were dropped just before dawn. There was a chaney moonlight and very little wind, which allowed Nick to slip the chute enough to get them down without breaking any legs or hanging up on a cliff. Mija had not jumped before, and since Nick did not want to lose her now, after having kept her alive so long, he took her down with him in the black chute. They landed with a

jarring thump on a smallish plateau that somewhat resembled a moonscape. The AXE plane made another pass and dropped a jeep, also by black chute, and loaded with supplies. Then the AXE plane waggled its wings at them for luck and droned away to the north.

N3 was, as usual, very much on his own. True that the response from the Ankara *depot* to his demands had been prompt and nearly awesome. He had gotten everything he wanted, with a few extras thrown in. Nevertheless here he was again, in the midst of the savage Kurdish Taurus, in a country the Devil wouldn't claim. Looking for a certain Basque named Carlos Gonzalez. Object—to kill!

By the time a watery sun, obscured frequently by rain and sleet, peered over the towering peaks to the north and east Nick and the girl were snug in a cave on a ledge overlooking a gorge that led into the Edessa Pass. The jeep was concealed in another cave nearby.

"This is mountain goat country," Nick had cracked as they made a turn in creeper gear with the off front wheel hanging over a chasm that fell away for a thousand feet. "I don't think we'll be using the jeep much."

But the Basque, he remembered, was reputed to get around in this country without too much difficulty. Maybe he knew a few tricks, remembered from his youth in northern Spain.

Mija was too terrified to speak. She rode with her eyes closed most of the time, reaching to touch Nick every now and then for comfort. He sensed that it was not only the dizzy trail that frightened her—it was the entire setup, everything. The brooding weather, the high stab of gloomy peaks on which the snow never melted, the terrible depressing sense of isolation. Nick felt it himself. It would pass, he knew, as soon as he got into action.

After they found the cave and settled in, as snug as possible in the circumstances, Mija still wanted comforting. Outside the rain was sloshing down in a gray curtain of discouragement. It was impossible to build a fire in the cave, even had they had dry fuel—the smoke would drive them out. And Nick dared not risk a fire on the ledge.

Partly to comfort her, and because the urge was moving him again, he crept into her sleeping bag. It was tight.

quarters—Mija had to wriggle out of her clothes somewhat like a snake shedding its skin—but the result was happy for them both. Mija sighed and moaned and finally cried—and enjoyed herself immensely. When it was over she went promptly off to sleep.

N3 wriggled out of the sleeping bag and went to where the rifle was standing near the cave entrance. He very seldom had use for a rifle on these jobs, and did not think he would need it now, but it had seemed wise to bring it. Wolves ranged these mountains and gorges—wolves and packs of huge Anatolian sheep dogs gone wild.

Nick took up the rifle, a Savage 99 using high velocity ball, with a Weatherby scope, and bent low to pass out on the ledge. He turned up the collar of his heavy sheepskin coat against the pelting rain and made his way along the ledge to the cave where the jeep was hidden. Once there he took stock. He sat in the jeep, fiddling idly with the short-wave set, and let plans and events spin through his agile mind like an unreeling tape.

By orders, and also by his own desire, he would preserve radio silence except in the event of a top level emergency. Ankara would feed him information at specified intervals.

In the time since he had leaped from the Annex roof to the trampoline much had transpired. It had been a time of frenetic rush-rush, with things going well—a nice switch—and everyone cooperating beautifully. The Turkish and Syrian police and military were working well together, which was practically unheard of. So were Interpol and the CIA and what was left of U.S. Narcotics in Asia—all working together. Nick sat now in the clammy, dark cave and stroked the sleek barrel of the Savage and knew that he was the apex, the sharp driving point, of all this effort. He must kill the Basque, of course, but he had another job. To raise so much hell, to sow so much devastation, that it would be months, perhaps even years, before the Syndicate—and now it would seem the Chinese Reds, who were muscling in on a good thing—before they could get operations back to normal. That it was only a stop-gap, Nick understood. The opium trade would go on. Somehow the poppies from the small Turkish farms would find their way over the border to the clandestine process-

ing factories; they would be transformed into heroin which would be pumped into the shrieking veins of addicts all over the world. Men and women—and a lot of kids, teenagers—would die from that heroin! Die of infections from filthy, unsterilized needles. Die of over-doses. Die of police bullets while committing crimes to get money for dope! And those who did not actually die a physical death would still be dead! Hopeless. Nick thought of Mija and the white needle marks on her lovely arms and his mouth quirked in something that was nearly tenderness. It wasn't really—it was admiration. That kid had come back a long way. But she was one in a million. One of the lucky ones.

He caressed the long shining barrel of the Savage and wondered about the Basque. The Basque had been reported in Urfa—fat Defarge had not lied on his death bed—and it was believed that a caravan was being organized. Turkish secret police knew that much—what they did not know was how to stop it.

If the Basque came to the Edessa Pass, two miles away down the gorge from where N3 now sat, if he came there to rendezvous with his fierce Kurds, why not creep to within range and shoot the bastard in cold blood?

The short wave set on the dashboard of the jeep began to buzz. Nick glanced at his watch. Time had slipped away. Ankara was coming in. The broadcast would be short and to the point, he knew. They were reckoning on the Basque having a DF set among his "oil prospecting" equipment.

The voice rasped into the little cave, loud and clear, scale five.

"Turkey to Pilgrim—Turkey to Pilgrim—the Arabs have folded their tents. The bird is on the wing. Fat man's truth to tell. Dark of moon is danger. Believed two pints vermilion saffron accompany shipment. End of transmission."

Nick lit a cigarette and straightened the message around in his mind. *Arabs had folded their tents*—the thing was getting under way. The TSP thought a smuggling train was being organized. *The bird is on the wing.* The Basque had left Urfa. *Fat man's truth to tell.* Defarge had not been lying. *Dark of moon is danger.* That meant they would go the next night, when there would be no moon.

Believed two pints vermilion saffron—Nick smiled a cold little smile. No doubt now that the Red Chinese were getting into the act. Hawk and the CIA were right. Two Chinese gentlemen would be with the caravan. Inspecting their new property, no doubt. What had Defarge said—ten million Turkish pounds! The Syndicate really should have known better! They had a million—it was all they would ever get. Sooner or later the Chinese would pay them off—in treachery!

The octopus that lived in Peking had long tentacles. And the Red octopus, Nick admitted as he stubbed out his cigarette, was getting quite a bargain this time. It was to the Reds advantage to promote the use of dope wherever they could. It weakened morale, sucked away the will to resist; gave the West another huge problem. So the Reds took over a highly organized dope smuggling apparatus. Such an apparatus could be used for other things than smuggling—espionage! Thirdly—and possibly the most important to the Reds—were the fierce Kurds. They were always rebelling against Iran and Turkey, always agitating for self government, for a Kurdish Republic. The Chinese would promise them that—would help with money and arms to see that the Kurds kept on rebelling until they got—a *Red* Kurdish Republic!

Gathering an arm-load of supplies from the jeep, Nick went back to the other cave where Mija still slept. Wheels within wheels—stroke and counter-stroke—twist upon complicated twist in the grim international game the great Powers were playing. His job was childishly simply in comparison—all he had to do was kill a man!

He and Mija spent that day and night in the cave, except for one brief scouting expedition by Nick. The gorge below was still empty. He saw a pack of wild dogs in the distance, across the gorge, and put the field glasses on them in curiosity. They were great hairy brutes, larger than the Irish wolf hound. Nick watched a dozen or so quarreling viciously over the remains of a goat they had pulled down.

When he got back to the cave he said to the girl: "You know that I'm going to have to leave you here alone for a time?"

She was busy preparing a meal over a small gasoline

stove. A hissing Coleman lantern cast a fitful white light through the little cavern. Mija was pale, with little blue shadows beneath her eyes. Nick sensed that she was afraid—afraid of everything but himself. Perhaps he had been wrong to bring her—but it had seemed the one sure way to keep her alive.

Mija said: "I understand, Nick darling. You have made it very straight, the instructions. When the caravan goes you will go with it—I follow in six hours. I remain behind in the jeep until I see your flare—the AXE flare. Or until you join me. If—if you do not come back I go to Urfa and turn myself to the TSP—the Turkish Secret Police."

Very matter of factly Mija served up two tin plates loaded with canned hash. "The TSP will send me back to Istanbul, yes? And sooner or later *they*, the dope people, will kill me! No?"

Nick patted her shoulder. "No. It won't come to that. Not if my plans go well. They're going to be so damned busy trying to put Humpty Dumpty together again that they won't have any time for you."

Mija frowned. She patted the red beret into place and sat down on a rock beside him. "Humpty Dumpty? I do not get him—it?"

Nick rested his hand on the firm soft flesh of her knee. He could feel the warmth of her through the heavy twill. "Never mind. It will be all right. I'll turn the jeep and head it back down the ledge. All you'll have to do is go back the way we came and pick up the caravan's trail. Just be sure to stay six hours behind us. Now let's eat and go to work. I'll need your help—and your opinion. I've never impersonated a Kurd before."

"Would it not be better," the girl said, "to wait until the real Kurds arrive? Then you will be able to see how *they* look."

N3 nodded. "You are right, of course. Out of the mouths of babes."

The Kurds came into the gorge the next morning just after sunrise. It was a clear, fine day with great gusts of wind scouring the cliffs. Nick lay in a crevice where two great boulders formed a natural port-hole, and studied the Kurds through his powerful glasses.

There were a lot of them. At a rough estimate over a

hundred. Their small black tents dotted the gorge floor like mushrooms. They had horses and camels and a large herd of goats. The goats were to be driven ahead of the caravan to detect mine fields along the Syrian border. If the goats were blown sky high the caravan would simply double back and try at another place.

He heard Mija crawling up behind him. She kissed his cheek and settled down beside him. "Let me have the glasses, please? I have never seen a wild Kurd."

He handed her the binoculars. "Be my guest, honey. Try not to go into shock. They *are* just as fierce as they look!"

Mija looked. He felt her shiver. "Ugg—I have heard much of these people, now I see that I have heard the truth. They are—how you say? Primitive?"

"You can," said N3, "say that again! Truly the forgotten of Allah! The old Sultans used them as Cossacks, you know. Killing, to a Kurd, is all in the day's work."

Somewhat like an agent for AXE, he thought sardonically. An agent with the rank of KILLMASTER. Was there any real difference?"

The day wore on. Nick remained to study the Kurdish. Mija went back to the cave to rest.

When the wind was right—it kept backing around—Nick could hear the bleating of the goats and the hoarse complaining cries of the camels. The Kurds themselves lazed about, drinking something that he guessed was fermented goats milk and playing *as*, their interminable card game that was much like poker. He watched them kill a goat and eat the meat nearly raw, searing it for a moment or two over the fire.

The Basque, Nick conceded, picked his shock troops well. The Kurds, though fanatic Moslems, were natural enemies of Syrians and the Turk. Better smugglers could not be found. They would fight to the death and, if they were taken alive, would never talk. Mousy had vouched for that, back in the Hole. Nick pushed that thought away hastily—he did not want to think about Mousy!

After another hour of careful study Nick crawled back to the cave and began to make up for the job ahead. From the big rhino hide suitcase he took the garments furnished at a moment's notice by Ankara. He decided

against a turban, donned a combined shawl and hood instead. It would be cold tonight and the shawl would help mask his face.

N3 was a long-head as were most Kurds, and with his face stained a dark walnut he should get by. He spoke no Kurdish—an oversight which he thought he might point out to the AXE planners, if he ever got back—and so he would have to be a mute. He practiced now by making horrible sounds in his throat and pointing to his mouth, until Mija told him to shut up. He was getting on her nerves.

Nick put on the felt boots and the long padded jacket, which was sufficiently dirty and smelled badly enough to be the real thing. Mija sniffed and made a face. "Uhhhh—you are of a terrible odor. I am almost glad you are going."

"Goats," said Nick. "Goats and camels and bloody meat and a little dung thrown in. They all wipe their hands on their jackets, like so—" and he illustrated. "It's no wonder they come to smell after a time. And these clothes are the real McCoy, Ankara told me. They came off a dead Kurd."

Mija began to look ill. "Please, Nick! I am not of the strong stomach. Let us get on with it. I will put on the beard now, yes?"

"Might as well," he said resignedly. "It'll itch like hell, but no help for it. Get the spirit gum—and hand me that dagger."

He thrust the long curved dagger into his sash. Around his wrists he wound several yards of dirty white cloth—a Kurd carries his own bandages into battle. When Mija had carefully pinched and patted the short black beard into place she got a mirror from the pile of supplies and let him have a look at himself.

"Christ!" said N3. "I ought to pass. I look horrible enough!"

The Basque arrived just before sunset. Nick, watching with the glasses from the boulder screen, understood now how the man got around so well in rough country. Half tracks! Two half tracks and a Land Rover truck! They came out of the west and stopped at the mouth of the gorge where it entered the Edessa Pass.

The leader of the Kurds, a tall fierce hairy man, left the little encampment of black tents and went toward a small, dun colored trailer attached to the Land Rover. The door of the trailer opened and the Basque came out. A bright ray of the setting sun fell full on the man's face. N3's jaw muscles tightened as he studied the man through the glasses. The next man I kill!

The Basque had the look of a dissolute bulldog. He was squat and powerful, with the wide sloping shoulders of a boxer and a concave face and a flattened nose. He was wearing high lace boots, riding breeches, and a leather windbreaker. He was carrying a heavy automatic in a holster slung from a web belt. So powerful were the binoculars that Nick could see the butt of the pistol clearly—Colt .45, 1911 model. A gun that had been invented to stop amoks in the Philippines. Nick patted the Luger nestling in his belt beneath the padded jacket. Wilhelmina was a match for any .45!

He watched as the Basque handed a small packet to the leader of the Kurds. Money, no doubt. Then the Basque was giving swift orders and the Kurds were going to work, converging on the half tracks and the Land Rover. The Kurds formed a line and each man was laden with a sizable burden, a square bale wrapped in burlap and wire strapped. Good organization, admitted the spying N3. The Syndicate operated like any efficient business—even to killing. And this appeared to be a massive shipment! More and more of the bales were hauled out of the half tracks and the Land Rover and carried by the sweating Kurds to the camels groaning and moaning in resentment as they were loaded.

The sun was only a red cloud over the western mountains now. It would be dark soon. The Syrian border lay some ten miles to the south.

So far there had been no sign of the two Chinese who were supposed to be with the Basque. Nick frowned. Maybe the TSP, even the AXE men in Ankara, were wrong. Or there had been a last minute change of plans. No matter. The big job, his job, was at hand.

Nick squirmed back to the cave and said goodbye to Mija. There was not much time for talk, nor need for it. She knew what to do. He kissed her and she clung to him.

for a moment, even though he was bearded and stank like a cesspool. Nick patted her shoulder and turned away, not wanting to see the tears in her eyes.

"You'll be all right," he said. "I'm leaving you the rifle, just in case. You know how to use it?"

Mija nodded. "I know. I have fired rifles."

"Good. Remember—when you see the AXE flare come for me. If you don't see it wait for me. If you hear gunfire take cover and wait. I'll find you. Okay?"

"Okay—darling. C—come back to me soon."

"Never miss." said N3. The bravado was to reassure her. He felt fine. Confident. Even the short time in the cave had made him restless. It was time to raise a little hell.

He went down the ledge as stealthily as a mountain cat. He used the thickening shadows to work his way among the towering rocks and boulders until he was within a hundred yards of the Kurds' camp. The Asiatic dusk was falling rapidly now, coming down over the mountains like a great black cloak. Nick waited patiently. When the trek began there would be out-riders. The gorge narrowed just before it debouched into the Edessa Pass—that would be his chance.

The last embers of sunset were turning ash gray when the caravan started down the gorge. Nick followed, a hundred yards on the left flank, dodging from rock to massive rock, slipping and sliding on the shale, but managing to keep up.

His chance came sooner than he had expected. An outrider came to within a few yards of Nick and dismounted. His purpose was evident—he fumbled with his heavy clothes and began to relieve himself against the very rock where Nick was hidden. His mount smelled the stranger and shied away, pawing and squealing in alarm.

The Kurd implored Allah to rid him of such a skittish mount. "Quiet, oh son of Shaitan," he commanded. "Quiet—or I will feed you to the jackals."

The horse stopped rearing but kept pricking its ears and curvetting nervously. The Kurd swore again as he adjusted his baggy pants. "You are a son of a diseased camel," he told the horse. "Shaitan himself would not

have you. By Allah's beard I swear that I—I—Uhhhhhhhhhhhh."

The stiletto slid into his heart from the rear. The man slumped. Nick let him fall and leaped to grab at the reins before the horse could bolt. He gentled the beast with coaxing words. Still holding the reins he dragged the Kurd behind the rocks with one hand.

"Allah take you," said N3 as he gazed for a moment at the dead man's face. He felt no compassion, no hate. The man had been in a dirty business. The man had been unlucky. Nick saw, in a freakish glint of light, that the man had an odd red mark on his forehead. A caste mark? Nick felt a moment of instinctive apprehension which he could not explain. So the Kurds used caste marks! So? He examined the red mark again—it was in the shape of a tiny crescent. Nick shrugged and mounted the horse. Probably had a religious meaning of some sort. He rode out of the shadows to join the caravan.

For an hour all went well. Nick kept his horse off the flank of the caravan, well away from the goats and eternally complaining camels. There was no moon, but the tars were brilliant. No one came near him. By now the horse had grown accustomed to him and obeyed commands readily. Nick figured they had made about five miles toward the border. He began to formulate a plan for getting at the Basque. That done he would destroy the opium and, Allah willing, as many of the Kurds as he could. When it got too hot he would run for it. He would send up the AXE flare and Mija would pick him up in the jeep.

N3 grinned to himself without joy. All this he must do—*Inshallah!*

Suddenly he noticed that half a dozen tribesmen had wheeled out of line and were heading back the way they had come. A worm of uneasiness began to gnaw at him. Why? What was back there to interest them? Mija was back there, sure, but she would be safe in the cave. Five hours yet before she was to come on.

He had let his mount drift closer to the caravan. Now he looked up to see three Kurds riding toward him. Nick stiffened, then forced himself to relax. It must come sometime, this confrontation. Now was as good a time as any.

He readied himself to play the part of a mute. Hoping fervently that he had no cousins or brothers in the caravan—no one who would recognize the horse and know the rider was a phony!

The riders halted a dozen yards away. One of them beckoned to Nick and spoke, "*Buraya geliniz!*" Come here! In Turkish!

It was an old trick and Nick did not fall for it. Very few Kurds spoke Turkish.

He stared at the riders dumbly and shook his head. He pointed to his mouth and made grunting sounds. At the same time the electric shock of warning was racing along his nerves. Why would they speak to him in Turkish!

The riders converged on Nick, hemming him in. They did not appear to be alarmed or unfriendly. One of them handed him a flat pancake loaf of bread, saying something in Kurdish.

Another of the riders had the bridle of Nick's mount in his strong dirty fingers and was pulling the horse and rider toward the caravan. Still they did not seem hostile. Nick saw that the caravan had halted. Kurds were grouping into little knots, gradually being arranged into a circle. He noticed another circle of Kurds farther out in the shadows, these all mounted and forming a—guard ring?

By now Nick was definitely uneasy. He told himself not to get jumpy, not to do anything precipitate. If he started blasting away now he would ruin everything. He would never get close enough to the Basque to kill him—he would be lucky to get out of it alive. And the caravan, with the king-size cargo of opium, would simply disperse to form again another time. No—nothing was to be gained by panic. It might be some sort of a ceremony. Or an inspection. Perhaps new orders would be issued. Nothing to do but play it through.

The dismounted Kurds were being formed into a definite circle now. One of the riders with Nick blared an order at him and gestured toward the circle. He was to join it. Nick got off his horse and walked to join the waiting men. No one paid any particular attention to him. He found a place in the circle of men and waited. What in hell was going on?

He saw the Basque coming around the circle. He was

inspecting each man with a small flashlight. He would reach up to yank at the man's turban or head shawl, flash the light briefly, then move on to the next man.

Nick saw it then! Understood the clever and beautiful simple little trap into which he had fallen!

That goddamned red crescent mark on the dead Kurd's head!

He didn't have any!

Chapter 11

INSHALLAH!

The death watch of six Kurdish tribesmen had stopped to pray. They dismounted and went to their knees, facing Mecca, touching their foreheads to the ground and beseeching Allah to protect them. All of them were true to their fierce philosophy—none of them thought of praying for the unbeliever, the infidel dog who was tied to the camel and would shortly be blown to bits by the mines. If there were mines.

N3, his hands bound behind him, his ankles roped together beneath the shaggy camel's belly, was thinking that at last he had made *the* mistake. The fatal mistake that every agent makes sooner or later. The one that expunges his name from the active rolls, that earns him a place on some bronze plaque of honor which few people see or care about.

Nick was boiling with rage and frustration. To be taken so easily! By such a simple trick! The Basque had been as fiendishly clever as a child. At the last moment, just before the caravan began to trek, he had marked every tribesman with a red crescent mark. An hour later he had halted the caravan for an inspection. Nick had never had a chance. He had tried to sidle away, to vanish in the shadows, but the outer circle of horsemen had hemmed him in. The evasive attempt had called attention to him, and he had known the futility of resistance when three or four of the Kurds seized him. They had dragged him back to the Basque's sumptuously furnished little trailer. There he had been searched and his weapons taken: the Luger, the stiletto, the gas pellet and four fragmentation grenades he had had taped to his belt. They missed the big one—his sole remaining Tiny Tim—which he wore in a bag between his legs like a third testicle. This oversight seemed

of small moment at the time—N3 had never been more helpless. The Kurds had been rough and now he stood before the Basque disheveled and bleeding from a dozen cuts, his hands bound painfully behind him.

The Basque regarded him from behind a small field desk. He picked up a pencil and tapped with it on the desk for a moment before he spoke. Behind him sat two neat little Chinese. They regarded Nick with bland dark eyes in which he read only curiosity. He meant nothing to them. Not at this stage. They were dressed in neat padded uniforms. Each wore a round peaked cap bearing a single red star.

The Basque had piggy little eyes surrounded by heavy scar tissue. He spoke in a matter of fact voice. He might have been interviewing Nick for a position.

"Your name?"

"John R. Thomson. No P." It was a name he used for such occasions.

The Basque smiled faintly. "That's a lie, but it doesn't matter. Not in the least. You're an AXE man?"

"AXE?" Nick shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

At the word AXE one of the little Chinese said something to his companion. They whispered for a moment, then one of them spoke to the Basque.

"AXE? This man is of that organization? The American murder society?"

The Basque nodded. "Right. Watch. I'll prove it." He made a sign to the two huge Kurds who were guarding the door of the trailer. They seized Nick from behind. He did not struggle. He *might* get a chance, one chance, to get out of this, but the time was not yet.

The Basque came around his desk and rolled up Nick's sleeve. He grunted in satisfaction and pointed to the tiny AXE symbol tattooed on the left arm just above the elbow. "You see," said the Basque in triumph. "I have seen that mark before. Once before. I killed that sonofabitch!"

N3 did not flicker an eyelash. But he filed it away. That might be Matthews, he thought, who had never come back from a mission in Iran.

The two Chinese were hissing and buzzing now. They stared at Nick with narrowed cold eyes, as though they

were looking at the Devil himself. One of them said: "Our government would very much like to have this man when you are through with him, Mr. Gonzalez. Perhaps that could be arranged?"

The Basque went back to his desk. He frowned. "I doubt it. My—some people in Istanbul are anxious to talk to him, too. You people will have to wait your turn. Anyway this is still *my* operation. Don't forget that! You people haven't moved in yet. I've got my own plans for our friend here, Mr—er—Mr. Thomson? No P?"

The Basque smiled cruelly at Nick. "I hear you've been raising a lot of hell in Istanbul?"

Nick returned a smile of derision. "A little, maybe. I try to kill rats whenever I find them."

The Basque ignored that. He said, "You're alone, of course?"

"Of course. I always work alone."

"Probably another lie. But I'll find out. I sent a party back along our trail to check."

Those six tribesmen he had seen pulling out and back-tracking! Nick found himself praying that Mija would obey orders. Would stay in the cave until six hours had elapsed. If she did the chances were good the Kurds would miss her. If not—*Inshallah!*

The Basque made a mistake then. As simple—and deadly—a mistake as Nick had made about the red marks. The Basque turned to the two Chinese and began to discuss his plans—in fluent Chinese. It was such a complete fool's error that at first Nick was suspicious. Then, as he listened with a blank face of ignorance, he realized that the Basque and the Chinese were simply assuming, without much thought, that their prisoner could not speak or understand Chinese. Nick listened avidly, careful not to betray his comprehension.

The Basque, ignoring Nick for the moment, was pointing out something on a map. His Chinese was of the south, a Cantonese dialect, but the two little men appeared to understand him perfectly. So did N3.

"This is the Kardu River," the Basque explained. "A tributary of the Tigris. We have never used this ford before and probably it is not mined or guarded. It forms the border between Turkey and Syria. If we get across

there—good! If we run into trouble we'll go a mile west, where there is another ford, and cross there while the trouble is going on here!" He stabbed the map with a thick forefinger. "They've got over five hundred miles of border to patrol, the Turks and Syrians, and not much to do it with! I don't expect any trouble. They won't have more than one patrol to fifty miles—they're spread too thin. So we use the goats and half a dozen Kurds as a decoy, see what happens, and then I'll take it from here."

One of the Chinese hissed and looked worried. "You say there are sometimes mines?"

The Basque shrugged. "Sometimes. Not often, but now and then we run into a mine field. I use goats." The Basque folded the map and turned to look at Nick. In English he said: "I said that they want you back in Istanbul—and I suppose I should follow orders, but I'm running things down here. Something they forget at times! And I'm a man that likes a little fun—a little amusement. I think you're going to provide it, AXE man! Would you like me to explain?"

Nick kept his face expressionless. He was sure he knew what was coming. There was nothing he could do about it at the moment. He said, "Go ahead. Coming from you it's sure to be nasty."

The Basque showed his tobacco stained teeth. "Not as nasty as it might be. I'm going to give you a chance. I could turn you over to my Kurds, you know. You wouldn't like that, AXE man! Believe me. But we'll make a little game of chance out of it—a gamble. I'm going to tie you on a camel and let you be a mine detector for me."

N3 gave him a hard grin. "And if there are no mines. if I get over the border safely, then you'll let me go free?"

The Basque broke into laughter. He shoved a long brown cigar into his flattened face. "Oh, yes! I'll let you go—right back to Istanbul! I told you—they're real anxious to see you there! So anxious they're sending a plane first thing in the morning. But maybe you'd better hope you're not around! There's a certain surgical gentleman who likes to experiment with people." The Basque laughed. He lit his cigar and puffed blue smoke, squinting his little eyes at Nick. "And when *he* gets through with

you, AXE man, the Chinese here want you. You're quite in demand. If I were you, I'd *pray* that the camel steps on a mine!"

The back wall of the trailer was lined with green steel consoles. Now one of them began to buzz and a speaker rasped metallicly.

The Basque knocked ash from his cigar. "That'll be Istanbul now, wanting to know what goes on." He grinned at Nick. "I'll have to lie a little, I'm afraid. Istanbul's not going to approve of our little game of chance."

The Basque gave a harsh order in Kurdish and the two guards took Nick outside and bound him to a camel. They bound him with leather thongs, tightly and without mercy, and drove the camel into the midst of the herd of sacrificial goats.

Now, as Nick waited for the Kurds to finish their prayers, he tested his bonds. Even his tremendous strength could not break them, not even gain an inch of slack. They had soaked the leather thongs in water before they bound him—now the thongs were drying and shrinking! Nick could feel them cutting into his flesh like sharp wire.

The camel was unhappy. It did not like goats. It did not like Nick, and repeatedly reached back with long yellow teeth to snap at the rider's legs.

They approached the ford of the Kardu. It was still dark, but a faint line of pearl was slowly appearing over the mountains to the east. Half a mile back the Basque was following with the rest of the caravan, waiting to see what would happen at the ford.

N3 figured his chances. If the camel stepped on a mine he would be blown to hell. If the Turks, or the Syrians, were waiting in ambush they would probably shoot him dead before he could identify himself. *If* he could identify himself.

Nick found himself hoping that the Syrians and Turks would be very much absent! Then, if there were no mines and he got over safely, the Basque would send him back to Istanbul. To the tender mercies of Dr. Six, with his exclusive sanitarium on the Bosphorus, where the good doctor ran such a fine clinic for the poor! There would be

as Nick had once thought while in the Hole, the little sharp knives and the truth serums!

But there would also be time! At least a little time to plan, to watch and wait, perhaps to act. Time!

The camel smelled water and began to run, forcing its way through the herd of goats, snapping and biting, trying to break into a long legged, splaying run. Nick lurched and bounced, tossed about brutally, held on the ungainly beast only by the torturing leather thongs. The Kurdish guards swung in closer, urging the goats on with shrill curses. Each of the half dozen Kurds, Nick had noted, was armed with a Russian made submachine gun. No old fashioned *jebel* rifles here! Probably the gift of the Chinese.

The camel stepped on a mine!

Had it been a high explosive mine it would have blown Nick to instant hell. It was not high explosive. It was an anti-personnel mine. A daisy cutter! A ball bouncer! So designed that when the mine was tripped a canister of shrapnel leaped into a man's crotch and tore out his balls and guts in a savage explosion.

The camel's racing stride carried it exactly over the mine as it exploded. The blasting shrapnel ripped the camel's belly apart, tearing out the entrails and lacerating Nick's ankles at the same time it severed the thongs binding them. Nick went flying into the terrified herd of goats as the camel stumbled and fell with a last bloody dying bellow.

Nick came down into the smother of tightly packed and frightened goats. As he fell he heard another mine explode, saw bits of goat flying about him. He landed on the head of a big ram and his wrists, bound behind him with the leather thong, slipped over the ram's horns. He found himself literally suspended from the goat's head by his thonged wrists. The goat was plunging and lunging in a frenzy of terror, shaking its head and tearing at the unknown weight that was bowing it down.

It was a large and powerful goat and its long curving horns did what Nick had been unable to do. It broke the thong binding his wrists. Nick felt his wrists come free. He fell away from the plunging goat. He rolled under the

hooves of a dozen or so of the beasts as they charged over him, protecting his face and head as best he could.

He heard the rattle of a machine gun and knew the Kurdish guards were firing into the mass of goats. Nick fought to his feet, surprised and gratified to find that he could move freely—that meant no bones broken, a miracle—and bending low he ran with the herd of goats. He risked a glance and saw one of the Kurds spurring his horse into the mass of stampeding animals.

Another Kurd loosed a burst into the herd, spraying in the hope of hitting Nick. He ducked again and hooked his arm around the neck of a large goat, swung in under it with his legs wrapped around its belly. The goat charged along with the mob of its frightened fellows. The Kurds fired another burst, and the goats changed direction and charged at the Kurd riding into their midst.

Nick saw the stirrup and the Kurd's felt boot and knew it was the only chance he would have. He grabbed for the foot and pulled the surprised and yelling Kurd from the saddle. As he fell toward N3 the AXE man plucked the man's curved dagger from its scabbard. So swift was the motion that the Kurd fell on his own dagger, impaling himself just below the breast-bone. Blood gushed over his beard and he fell into the goat herd, the machine gun skittering from dead hands.

Nick reached for the tommy gun and the horse's bridle in the same lightning motion. His heart was full of battle and he felt like whooping aloud his joy and hate and rage. He was free! If he went down now it would be fighting—taking a lot of the others with him!

Possibly the remaining Kurds expected him to run for it, to make for the Kardu and across to the Syrian side. All of them must have been for a moment bemused by the swiftness with which N3 acted. He put his heels into the horse and charged them, the tommy gun spitting red flame and lead in a hail of retribution.

Two of the Kurds went down immediately. Two more turned and fled, back toward where the Basque waited with the main caravan. The remaining Kurd, screaming prayers to Allah, charged. Nick went at him in an all out gallop. They were like two knights of old in a life or death tournament.

They came together with a great crash. Nick's mount went down. He fell free. The Kurd shrieked in triumph, pointed the tommy gun at Nick and squeezed the trigger. The gun jammed. Nick shot the Kurd off the horse with a tearing burst that nearly cut the man in two.

Nick staggered to his feet amid dust, blood, gunsmoke and the reeking smell of cordite. Dawn was nearly upon him now. The two Kurds would be reporting to the Basque.

There was not much time—for any of them. If there was a Turkish or Syrian patrol within twenty miles it would be on the way by now. The Basque would have to act fast. So would the man from AXE.

He examined his ankles, bleeding badly. He unwound the dirty cloths from his wrists, thinking that this was one Kurdish custom that made sense, and quickly bandaged each ankle. That done he swiftly set about collecting the tommy guns and ammunition of the dead Kurds.

Nick's horse had risen, apparently unhurt, and was now quietly cropping at the short grass nearby. The goats had vanished over the Kardu.

Burdened with the weight of four tommy guns and ammunition, N3 finally managed to mount the horse. He *chucked* softly to the animal and patted its neck. "Bear up fella. I know it's heavy but it won't be for long. Just about a mile."

A mile to the west, where there was another ford and the Basque would be trying to cross. Nick hoped. Maybe a patrol would show up and maybe it wouldn't, but the Basque was going to have a hot reception. As hot as the man from AXE could make it.

Chapter 12

A HEAD FOR A HEAD

The sun was a golden ball impaled on a towering white spike of mountain when Nick reached the ford a mile to the west. Here the Kardu ran broad and wide and shallow, the crystalline water rippling around huge smooth boulders. Squarely in the midst of the ford was a tiny island. A natural fortress with a solitary rock formation fringed by willows and tamarisk. Nick urged the tired horse into the stream and made for the island. The rocks and foliage would provide good cover. With any luck he should be able to hold off the caravan until a patrol arrived or, at the very least, make the Basque turn back.

Swiftly he made his dispositions. He could hear the groaning of camels now and there was a light cloud of dust to the north. The Basque was going to attempt the crossing in daylight. Nick could understand the man's reasoning—no patrols had appeared, and it was unlikely that this ford would also be mined.

Most important was the fact that the opium the caravan was carrying would be worth millions of dollars when processed into heroin and cut. The Syndicate was dollar conscious, just as any business organization. The Basque would do anything, literally, to get that opium safely across the border and dispersed. So N3, with his four tommy guns and eight long clips—each Kurd had carried a spare—made ready his little ambush.

and giving orders to the chief of the Kurds. If the Basque was worried by the report the two fleeing Kurds had brought back he gave no sign. Possibly, thought N3, he thinks I'm dead. Or that I've had enough and am running for my life.

The agent smiled grimly. The Basque would know different in a few minutes now. He rested the barrel of the tommy gun on a rock and zeroed in on the approaches to the ford.

Half a dozen tribesmen spurred their mounts into the shallow stream and halted to let them drink. One of the Kurds dismounted and began to fill water bottles. Nick sighted carefully.

He let go a long searing burst, aiming at the Kurds, trying to miss the horses. He got four of the Kurds at the first burst. One horse went down kicking and squealing. The other two Kurds spurred frantically back to the bank. Nick let go another burst and brought them both out of their saddles. Six fewer to reckon with. He ceased fire and waited.

The caravan was in utter confusion. Camels bolted in every direction. Nick saw the Basque stop, stare at the little island, then rein his horse around and gallop for the rear of the caravan where the half-tracks and Land Rover had now halted. The Basque leaped off his horse and disappeared into the trailer. A moment later, as Nick watched with interest, the man came running out with a pair of field glasses in his hands. The two Chinese were with him. Together the three ran for the rock formations bordering the pass from which they had just come.

The chief of the Kurds went dashing back to the pass, carrying a long rifle. He spurred his horse in among the rocks and disappeared. Nick felt a moment of uneasiness. It was the first rifle he had seen, and it had looked like a modern weapon with a scope. Very like the weapon he had left with Mija.

Mija! Those six Kurds that had gone back? If only she had obeyed his orders and stayed in the cave for six hours! If so the Kurds would have searched the back trail without finding anything, then rejoined the caravan. She would be safe. And certainly she would hear the gun fire and take cover.

Nick saw the glint of sun on glass high in the rocks flanking the narrow pass. He forgot the girl. The Basque was up there, using the glasses, searching for him. The Basque, in time, would figure it out. Know that he was up against only one man—the hated AXE man who was turning out to be such a thorn!

Spangggggggg—wheeeeeeeeeeeee—

The bullet scored a white gash on the rock six inches from Nick's head. He ducked away deeper into his little crevice. Damn! It hadn't taken the Basque long to locate him and open fire.

Whingggggggg— the high velocity lead danced around the rocks in a crazy ricochet. Goddamn! Nick wriggled to his right, into the long morning shadow of a tamarisk tree. *Zinnngggggg—whangggggggg—* lead did a whanging rigaloon about him. Nick lay as still as the boulders. The Basque hadn't really spotted him yet, not to pin-point him. He knew where Nick was, but not exactly. It would take a very lucky shot to get the AXE man.

The rifle fire ceased. For the moment it appeared to be stalemate. But only for the moment. Nick parted some weeds and peered across the stream. The Kurds were galloping off to left and right, riding hard, shouting and bloodying their spurs. Nick watched as they rode well out of gun shot, then turned and plunged their mounts into the Kardu, which ran deeper there. They were swimming their horses over. They were going to flank him!

So the Basque was going to fight it out! Nick felt a moment of near admiration for his adversary. He wasn't running! He must know who, and what, was holding him up at the ford. One man. Four guns with a very sparse supply of ammo. And no sign of a patrol yet. It must seem like a fair gamble to the Basque.

Cautiously he picked up a long piece of dead tree branch which lay at his side. It was about ten feet long. He snaked it through the weeds and undergrowth to a tall clump of saw grass. He poked with it until the grass swayed and moved back and forth.

Whingggggggggg— a bullet tore through the grass and splattered on a rock. So that was it. They keep him immobile while the tribesmen flank and behind him. Good tactics. Too.

When Nick had killed the first Kurd, amid the goats, he had taken the man's long curved dagger. Now he began to dig in the soft earth with the weapon. He would have time to carve only a shallow fox hole. He scooped as fast and frantically as he could. He dared not even raise himself with his elbows.

As he dug he could hear the moaning and complaining of camels again in the pass. N3 dug faster. If the Basque was thinking along the same lines that Nick was—then those camels would be coming across the ford in a furious stampede!

Nick grinned. Even at this desperate moment he could summon a little wry humor. The scene was out of a thousand western movies! With camels for cows and Kurds for Indians! He might be Custer himself—Custer at the Little Big Horn! But he was damned if he wanted to end the way Custer had—there must be some way out of this!

A far off mosquito buzzing sounded overhead. Nick rolled over on his back and searched the blue arch. After a moment he spotted it in the west, a toy plane droning steadily toward them. As it drew near Nick saw that it was an LC 4, one of the old artillery spotting planes from World War II. It bore Syrian markings.

N3 wriggled into his shallow fox hole and watched the plane begin to circle. Suddenly, came a rattling fusillade of machine gun fire. The wild Kurds were whooping and firing in a frenzy of hate and excitement.

A stray slug or two must have nicked the little craft, because it began to climb sharply and veered away. A moment later it was buzzing back to the west. No doubt it was already in radio contact with the nearest patrol. That meant nothing to him at the moment—the nearest patrol might still be hours away!

Then time ran out and there was no more thinking—a band of the tribesmen charged from the Syrian bank, straight at the island. Nick ripped them with the tommy gun until the barrel scorched his hands. The charge broke and melted just as the gun ran out of ammo. Nick seized another gun and turned to meet the charge from his right flank. The Kurds were splashing down into the ford, urging their horses on with short fierce cries. Some fired at

Nick, missing wildly, but most held their fire. He saw why and felt an instinctive cringing. Not cowardice, not the AXE man, but these Kurds were carrying long lances! He had never liked the thought of cold steel in his guts!

He let go a long scorching burst. Horses and men went down into the river, screaming and cursing. Still they came on.

N3 turned to meet a new charge on his left flank. Nick blessed their poor marksmanship and tried to disappear below ground level as he raked them fore and aft. He felt a slug twitch at his shoulder, another tugged at his knee. Slugs hit the rocks around him and whined in fierce banshee screaming rebounds. Nick fired and fired—the fight now one great indistinguishable moment of hell!

The remaining Kurds broke and spurred across to the Turkish side of the Kardu!

There was to be no respite. The camel stampede was coming straight at the ford, the frantic animals being beaten and driven by the angry Kurds. Nick caught a glimpse of the Basque. The man was driving the vehicle himself. Behind him came the other half track and the Land Rover with the trailer. The two Chinese were riding the Land Rover. On they came, all of them in a frantic rush. The camels, more than a hundred gaunt angry beasts, were pounding along with long strides, squealing and grunting and snapping at everything in sight with their long teeth.

They were going to smash him! Crush him and grind him and mangle him!

Nick reached down into the baggy Kurdish trousers and came up with his one remaining weapon. Tiny Tim! He twisted a dial on the lemon-sized bomb and drew his arm back and tossed it far and high into the oncoming stampede. Then N3 dove for his shallow hole and burrowed deep into it. He pressed his face against cool dirt and wondered if this was it? He had lived through one such blast—could he manage it again?

The ground rocked under him! There was a tremendous growing, incessant, blasting roar! Near him a boulder weighing thousands of pounds leaped into the air, hovered a moment, then crashed down within a foot of his head. The world let go a great sigh that became a rushing,

gusting, blasting wind! All the cymbals in the world crashed in the AXE man's ears. A great hand picked him up and flung him hard against stones that seemed to melt. He felt scarlet darkness close in for a moment—then it was over. The blast had tossed him a good thirty feet into the waters of the Kardu.

Very slowly, N3 turned over. He drank deeply, he drank as though he had never seen water before and never would again. Finally he managed to stand up and survey the charnel scene around him.

Nothing moved. Nothing lived. Here were only bits and pieces of Death! Men and horses and camels were fused in one great horrible jig-saw puzzle of arms, legs, heads and snake-like pinkish entrails.

He saw that both half tracks were upended. The Land Rover was on its nose and burning. The trailer, oddly enough, appeared to have suffered little damage. His weapons! Maybe he could recover them!

As he got to his feet he noticed movement near the trailer. Someone else was alive!

It was the Basque! As Nick stared, hardly believing, the man staggered from the trailer. He was carrying something in a bag. Nick moved after the man as he went wobbling off toward the rocks around the mouth of the pass. He did not once look around, just trudged doggedly along, stumbling and falling, always getting up again, always holding tight to the bag he carried.

Money, thought Nick. Money! Even when they're half dead they'll try to salvage money!

N3 yelled at the Basque. An insane and most incautious thing, but at the moment he was so near insane himself that it did not seem to matter.

"Hey—Basque! Basque! Wait for me, you sonofabitch! I'm going to kill you!"

Nick went toward the Basque. He could walk a little straighter now, almost normally. Nick began to gain on him.

The Basque reached the foot of an overhanging cliff and suddenly collapsed. He lay prone, clutching the bag to him. He went to where the Basque lay. Nick reached with an unsteady foot and turned the man over. The Basque rolled over with a groan.

Half his face was burnt away. The remainder was a great black blister. Nick stared down at him. The bastard was still alive, somehow. He flexed his hands, felt strength returning to them. He would strangle the bastard with his bare hands! He would take care of the Basque once and for all!

The Basque opened his eyes. He stared up at Nick and recognition flickered in the piggy little orbs surrounded by raw flesh. He fought for breath, fought to speak. He made a little motion toward the bag beside him. "I—not my orders—I—they—" A long, long pause. Nick waited. What was the man trying to say, to tell him?

He pushed the bag toward Nick with a feeble motion. "You—you take! Bury. I not responsible for—my Kurds, wild men. I did not order—I—"

Nick's granite strength was flooding back now. He reached for the bag. As he pulled it from the Basque's grasp the neck of the bag opened and something rolled out. It came to rest at Nick's feet.

It was the head of Mija Gialellis!

Nick felt his breath hiss inward and gather and clot in his lungs. He could not expell it for a long time. He simply stood and stared down at the head.

Mija was still wearing the red beret on the sleek, dark and now bloody cap of hair. The little silver pin Nick had given her glinted at him in the sunlight. The eyes were closed, at peace, but her red mouth was drawn down in a grimace of—terror at the last second?

The Basque was mumbling something, drooling and slobbering. His ruined hands scrabbled at the dirt. "I—not—" he said painfully. "I not order—Kurds, you know Kurds, wild and crazy, I not—"

Nick did not look at the head again. He fell to his knees beside the Basque and put his hands around the man's throat. Not quite understanding why, not even caring why, just knowing that he must somehow avenge Mija, Nick began to squeeze. His fingers cramped. He kept on squeezing. The Basque still breathed. Nick cursed his fingers for their weakness.

The rock overhang, weakened by the blast, began to shift and fall. He let go of the Basque and, with his sure instinct for danger, began to roll away. He rolled like a

barrel, over and over. Behind him he heard a crunching, grinding roar as the cliff came down.

When it was quiet he got to his feet and walked back to the cliff. Mija's head had been buried under the fall of rock. Nick saw the Basque's feet sticking out. He pulled the body out. It too was headless. A huge boulder had ground off the man's head! Nick left it and went to the Basque's trailer. Someone had told him that atomic blasts were freakish. He believed it now. The trailer had hardly been touched.

He found his Luger and stiletto and the gas pellet where they had been tossed into a corner by the tilting desk. He stowed the weapons away, wondering how long it would be before a patrol came and what sort of cover story he could give them. It would have to be a good one if he wasn't to rot in a Syrian or Turkish jail for a long time. It wasn't hard to imagine the reaction of the authorities to a single survivor of what must have been an atomic blast—a survivor who was clad in bloody, ragged Kurdish clothes and yet was not a Kurd. A solitary man amidst all the ruin—and millions of dollars worth of raw opium, by now splattered over a great many acres. Yes—the story would have to be a doozy!

The trouble was he still couldn't think very well! As Nick emerged from the trailer he heard the far off rum of a plane again. So—finally! Possibly the plane might be able, and ready, to land this time. A patrol wouldn't be far behind.

One of the Kurds was not dead. He lay on the island where Nick had fought so valiantly. Now he pulled his blasted body up and peered over the rocks at the fearful sight. The work of Shaitan no doubt! Allah had indeed forsaken his tribe!

But one lived! One moved! Near the trailer of the one they called the Basque! It was the infidel dog! He lived!

Praise Allah, thought the Kurd as he rolled painfully to his long rifle which lay nearby. He was one of the few who preferred the rifle to the devil guns. He leveled the piece across the rocks and took careful aim. He asked Allah to make his aim good, for surely he was dying and would soon be with the *houris* in Paradise, but first he must send this infidel to Hell. He pulled the trigger.

Nick. Nick felt no alarm. He was safe behind the thick green glass. The man with the straight razor could not get through!

Another figure swam into the confused picture. A tall, angular, spidery figure wearing some sort of white smock; a tall man with a vulture's face. Nick watched with great and consuming interest. The two figures were talking now, arguing about something. Nick knew, without knowing how or why, that they were discussing him.

The spidery man with the vulture's face won the argument. He was taking the man in the dinner jacket by the arm now, was leading him to the door, pushing him out of the room. Nick felt an odd sense of relief. Perhaps the vulture man was a friend!

The man in the white smock came back to the green glass barrier. He stood just the other side of it and peered in at Nick. He had something in his hand now. A small cup! Poison? thought Nick.

The white smocked man was reaching now, the small cup steady in his hand. Nick did not shrink away. The thick green glass would protect him. He began to laugh.

The glass shattered in a soft and noiseless explosion. Nick felt himself catapulted back to reality. He stared up the vulture faced man just as the contents of the cup was rced down his throat.

"Well," said the man bending over him. "So you've come back to us at last." He was speaking English. He stared down at Nick for a moment, false teeth shiny behind bloodless thin lips. In Turkish he said, "*Tunaydin.*" Good afternoon.

Nick tried to sit up. The man pushed him gently back down on the white hospital bed. He patted Nick's shoulder, an avuncular gesture that Nick, somehow, knew was very wrong. Swift instinct warned him—everything was wrong! Yet this was a hospital room, no doubt of that, and this man must be a doctor! That plane—the plane he had heard just before he passed out—that must have been either a Syrian or Turkish plane. It or a patrol must have found him and brought him out of the wilderness to a hospital. And yet—the man with the razor! Or had that been a crazy dream?

The man in the white doctor's smock was gazing down at him, an odd little smile on his face. He stroked his pointed chin with tapering, fingers. He *did* look like a vulture, Nick thought. A sort of evil, intellectual vulture. Coldness formed around his heart. He knew where he was now! And he knew who this man was! That plane—it had not been either Syrian or Turkish. It had been *their* plane!

The doctor must have read something of Nick's thoughts. He smiled, showing all of his perfectly fitting false teeth. "I see that you have figured it out, Mr. Carter. I thought you would in time. You are very quick, especially for a man in your condition."

Nick closed his eyes for a moment. He had to think. He was aware of a cloying, persistent drowsiness. Something in the drink he had just been given? His earlier thoughts came flashing back—truth serums and sharp little knives. The AXE man felt slow rage begin to build in him—goddamn it, after all he had been through! Now he would have to stand up to torture! He wasn't at all sure that he could do it—not in his present state.

He said: "My name isn't Carter. I don't know anyone named Carter. Who are you, anyway? And where am I?" Just to check, he thought bitterly. He knew!

The doctor bent over Nick and pulled back the sleeve of the surgical gown. He pointed to the little AXE tattoo. "You do not deny that you are an AXE agent?"

N3 would have liked to spit in his eye, but he was too weak. The sleepiness was growing. "I deny nothing," he said harshly. "I affirm nothing. Now either answer my questions or leave me alone. I'm sleepy as hell."

The doctor smiled again. He fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes, lit one, offered one to Nick who refused. The doctor stroked his chin again.

"You will get sleepier," he said. "You have, in fact, about one hour to live! I have just given you a massive dose of morphine, Mr. Carter!"

"I'm not Carter," N3 said stubbornly. "But I know who you are, you bastard! You're Dr. Joseph Six, aren't you? And I'm in your sanitarium on the Bosphorus. How soon does the torture start, Doc?"

"I don't think you understood me, Mr. Carter. I just

told you that I gave you a massive dose of morphine! You are dying now."

Nick grunted. "So you say."

The doctor shrugged. "Very well. You will find out. But as to torturing you, Mr. Carter, we have decided against that. You are much too dangerous to leave alive any longer than absolutely necessary! You claim you are not Carter, of the AXE murder section? Perhaps we are wrong, but I don't think so! You *must* be Carter, though we have no definite proof. Everything we have heard, and seen, points to you being Carter! It may please you, Mr. Carter, and I don't mind telling you now that you are to die shortly, that you have succeeded in wrecking a very important and costly operation!"

"Good for me," said Nick. "But I'm not finished yet. Two more to go—and I'm not Carter!"

Dr. Joseph Six built a little steeple with his long fingers. He peered at the man in the bed. "I think I understand. But *you* don't, not yet. You are dying, Mr. Carter. I am not lying or trying to trick you. Very shortly you will die and we will dress you and leave your body to be found by the Turkish police in Istanbul. You will have died of an overdose of morphine. There will be nothing to point us—which is the reason I could not let Johnny have his way. *He* wanted to cut your throat—like all the others. I thought it unwise, however. We are getting out—the Chinese are taking over the setup—and I—" here the doctor laughed, a shrill neighing sound, "I for one would like to spend my money in peace. I am an old man now—I should like to retire to the Greek islands and bask in the sun without fear of retribution. So I, er, dissuaded Johnny from cutting your throat. No easy task, mind you. He is something of a sadist, our Johnny. I might even say a psychotic!"

Nick began consciously to fight off sleep. Maybe this bastard was telling the truth! One thing, the man liked the sound of his own voice! Liked to talk. Let him, then. Find out all he could. The chances were that the man was lying—they wouldn't kill him so soon! He had been given something, of course, that was making him hellishly sleepy, probably a new form of truth serum. It would gain them little enough. Hawk's policy, AXE poli-

cy, was to tell an agent nothing more than absolutely necessary. What you didn't know you couldn't tell—not even under torture. Of course he might admit to being Nick Carter, but they seemed pretty sure of that already.

Now he said, "So that guy was really here? The man wearing the tux, the dinner jacket? I thought I was dreaming."

"It was no dream," said the doctor. "He wanted to cut your throat here and now and have done—but as I say it would never do. We want the heat *off*, as you American gangsters put it."

Nick was battling sleep with all his might. He had to stay awake, had to keep talking. "How did I get here?"

Dr. Six lit another of his long, Russian style cigarettes. He said: "Our plane got to the scene of the, er, explosion? From what I'm told there was utter devastation—a new sort of bomb, perhaps?"

Nick was silent.

"It doesn't matter," said Dr. Six. "Our people found you unconscious. You had been creased by a bullet. Nothing serious, just enough to knock you out."

Nick put a hand to his head, felt the light bandage swathing his temples. It was the first time he had been aware of it. He saw also that his ankles were neatly bandaged, and in half a dozen other spots he was wearing either gauze or plaster.

The doctor chuckled, a dry sound without mirth. "You were quite a mess, I hear. But you were alive, the only one alive, and you were obviously a white man. We had a good man in the plane. He used his head. He searched you and found the AXE mark and brought you back to Istanbul. They landed on the Asiatic side. We brought you here by ambulance—an emergency patient, you know." The doctor chuckled again. "I've kept you under heavy sedation until we could decide what to do—you've been out nearly thirty-six hours!"

Thirty-six hours! Nick glanced at the room's single window. Dusk was falling out there on the Bosphorus. He could see the pale glint of water far across toward the Asiatic side, and as he watched a rusty freighter glided by. She was flying the Soviet flag and making for the Black Sea. At least the bastard wasn't lying about that! N3,

fighting off unconsciousness, began wondering what was directly under the window?

He made a decision. He asked a question, knowing he was breaking security and not caring at the moment. He had to know.

"There was a girl with me," Nick said. "Never mind who, but there was. The Kurds killed her and cut off her head! At least that's what the Basque said—and I believed him. He was dying. I think he told the truth. You wouldn't know anything about that?"

For a long moment of silence the doctor stared at him with cold pale eyes. Then he shrugged. "What matter? You're dying, too. I'll tell you what I know, even though you won't answer my questions. Our man did not see the girl—"

"There was only her head," said Nick, wincing inwardly. "It was buried under a rock slide. So was the Basque."

The doctor nodded. He seemed sympathetic. "A barbaric people, the Kurds. Most barbaric—uncivilized."

Darkness was creeping over Nick. He pushed it away with a gigantic effort of will. "That's good, coming from you," he croaked. He tried to raise himself in the bed. "I hear you were a Nazi, Doctor? You worked in the camps, didn't you?"

Dr. Six did not actually click his heels, but the effect was there. His vulture's face tensed. "I did what little I could for the scientific glory of the Reich! And my experiments did not involve human beings—they were only Jews! But that is not important now—do you wish to hear about the girl? What little I know?"

I wish to kill you, thought Nick. I wish to take that scraggly vulturine neck of yours between my fingers and squeeze you into everlasting Hell! But darkness was battering the portals of his mind and he could barely move.

"Go on," he said weakly. "Tell me."

"Just as our plane was about to take off three Kurds came in—they had been sent back along the trail for some reason and—"

"The Basque sent six," Nick interrupted. "I saw them go."

"If you keep breaking in, Carter, you never will know. You're dying now, you know! It won't be long."

"So you say!"

Dr. Six sighed, then went on, "Our man talked to the Kurds. It was most important, as you will see in a moment. They told him they had found the girl because she had been attacked by wild dogs and was firing the rifle. They heard the shots. She killed one of them and that enraged them—so they had a little sport with her and then cut off her head."

Nick had never really learned to pray. Had never felt the need of it. He did not feel the need now—not for himself. But for Mija! Mija, who had been a nice kid who had gone to Hell once and come back, only to—Goddamn it, girl, Nick thought with savage intensity—goddamn it, Mija, somehow and someday I'll get it even for you!

Dr. Six was talking again. "Two of the remaining Kurds brought the head to the Basque. Probably they expected a reward. The other three stayed to hunt wild dogs and came along later. That's how our man got the story. He had to kill them, of course, just before the plane took off. It wouldn't have done to leave anyone alive! As it is the Turks and Syrians are going to be faced with a first class enigma, I think. A bloody massacre, everyone dead, two Chinese bodies, all the signs of an atomic explosion—and not a soul to tell what happened. It was an atomic explosion, wasn't it, Carter?"

Sly question, slipped in just as N3 was drifting away into darkness.

He aroused himself enough to say, "My name's not Carter. And to hell with you, Dr. Six!"

The black whirlpool caught him and spun him around. He was sinking far down into dark feathers. He knew that the doctor had risen and was standing over the bed, peering down at him. He felt the man's cold fingers as he lifted one of Nick's eyelids and peered into the eye. The doctor grunted. "*Ja*. Not long now, I think. I will leave you, Mr. Carter. Goodbye. I shall watch you closely. I have never before seen a man die of morphine poisoning. Ironical, *Ja*? You have fought so hard to prevent the opium trade—now you die of an opium derivative! *Ja-Ja*! Most ironical! Farewell, Mr. Carter!"

From somewhere down the long twilight corridors of

Time and Eternity Nick heard a door close. He was alone. Peace was closing in at last. The feather bed of Death was beckoning. So deep and soft, so utterly desirable. The doctor hadn't been kidding after all. He was dying!

Why not? A gentle voice whispered in his brain. Just let go. Dying isn't hard, nor frightening. People make a big thing out of it, but it's really nothing. Nothing at all. It's peace—perfect and absolute peace forever. Just let go, N3, and slide away down into oblivion. You've done your work—you've earned your rest! Let go—let go—

I will not! Beads of sweat popped out on Nick's forehead. Good sign. He could still feel! *I will not die*, he told himself again. He marshalled every ounce of will power he possessed. His magnificent body had always obeyed him, but it was reluctant now. He forced himself, by sheer guts, to raise his head from the pillow. *I will not die!*

He had to get out of bed somehow, get to his feet, get to the bathroom and begin vomiting. He racked his whirling brain for the antidote to morphine poisoning—motion, keep moving, and vomit—spew—get it up and out of you. Above all stay awake!

Then he thought—what's the use. Even if I do make it, you'll still have me. They're watching—Dr. Six is watching—probably a peephole or something. They'll only give it to me again and it will be all to do over! Why struggle? If you can't lick Death—join him!

I will not die!

Nick rolled out of the bed. The floor came up and slapped at him. It was like landing on a misty cloud. Soft. He fought to his knees, then upright, clinging to the chair in which Dr. Six had been sitting. Watch, he thought watch me, you sonofabitch! *I will not die!*

The window! It was a single pane of glass, large, a sort of picture window overlooking the Bosphorus. What was beneath it? Who cared! A ledge, a balcony, rocks and bricks—who cared? If he could make it—could crash out that window before the watchers could get into the room and stop him—he might, just might, have a chance. But first the bathroom. He must make himself vomit!

It was such a tiny bathroom, so dimly lit, and so many light years away. He fell, staggered up, fell and staggered up. The good Dr. Six will be getting his jollies out of this,

Nick thought fuzzily. He'll like this! Probably remind him of the days when he was killing those poor helpless bastards in the camps.

He fell again. He got up again. He was at last in the bathroom. Brutally he jammed his fingers down his throat and tried to vomit. Nothing! He tried again, willing himself to vomit. A thin trickle of vile tasting slime welled in his throat. Not enough. Not good enough. And he was falling away into darkness again, spinning down into the sleek dark vortex, the black glassy walls closing in.

Nick fell against the basin. He clung to it, his knees trembling, like cotton stalks under him. He fumbled in the medicine cabinet—might be something he could drink to make him vomit!

Bath salts! A bottle of bath salts! And a single rusty razor blade!

Hurry now! The little bathroom was swinging around, swaying, spinning from light into darkness. Not much time left.

I will not die!

N3 dumped the bath salts into the basin and ran water. He scooped up the mixture, thick and perfumed, and swallowed it. Nasty! He put his head in the basin and sucked up the mixture greedily, like a man dying of thirst. Vile. Filthy. But he was getting sick! Hope moved in him.

Nick spewed violently into the basin. He vomited and went on vomiting. Then he put his head in the basin again and drank his own vomit!

He got sick again. Terribly, unbearably sick, but he must bear it. He must live. He slashed the razor blade across his chest, feeling just a hint of pain. He slashed himself again, feeling the blade cut deep, seeing the blood well red. He vomited again, tearing his throat out, heaving and retching. He fell from weakness and nearly brained himself on the commode. Finally he could stand erect, or nearly erect. He was cramping badly now, his guts pulled into painful knots. But he was over the hump. Now the window!

It would have to be fast. Sneaky. They were watching. Dr. Six was watching. They had not bothered him yet. Probably amused by his antics, his fight against Death:

The doctor had probably enjoyed watching the interior of the gas chambers!

But if they saw him making for the window they would guess his intent and stop him. He was too weak to fight. It would have to be fast and smart.

N3 staggered back into the room and fell flat on his face. He lay thus for a moment, shielding his face, gathering his strength. When he got up he would pretend to stagger toward the bed, then reel and fall sideways toward the window. That would be it. That would be GO!

He didn't give a damn what was down there. It was better than staying here to die like a guinea pig for that Nazi sonofabitch. He might impale himself on a fence, or bash his brains out on a rock, or merely land on an awning or another roof. But go he would!

Painfully, not acting now, he got up and staggered toward the bed. He fell, got up, swayed toward the window. Now!

With a rush he went through the plate glass, bursting through with his head and shoulders, not even trying to protect himself. Glass tinkled and showered about him.

He was falling, turning, falling and turning—the world twice and he struck water.

Water! He was in the Bosphorus!

He took a deep breath and water rushed into his lungs and the blackness came back.

Chapter 14

PRIME CATCH

Someone was trying to pull his tongue out by the roots. Nick gagged and spewed. He was deathly ill. Someone else was astride his back, obviously trying to kill him by poking out his lungs with powerful strokes of giant steel hands. Push-pull-push-pull-in and out, in and out! Nick gagged some more and kept on spewing.

Dimly, faintly, the night swam into focus and he heard someone shout: "*Kus—Kus—he vomits like a sick baby!* But he was breathing. *Hakki!* You do well! Continue to deliver the resuscitation!"

Another voice, that of the man who was sitting astride him pumping out his lungs, said, "*Peki—Peki—be so kind, Ahmed, as to pull his tongue more and use yours less! Hurry! If we save the *effendim* there will be *back-sheesh* for all!*"

Nick hunched his back and rolled the man off of him. He felt surprisingly strong. He must have swallowed half the Bosphorus, greasy dirty salt water, and the effect had been to cleanse his guts thoroughly. He was lying on a crude wooden platform in a welter of freshly dead fish. Two men, one old and one young, were staring down at him in surprise. A flashlight, propped on a pile of fish, was the sole illumination. Nick realized that he was on a *daghlian*, a platform from which Turkish fishermen cast their nets. He saw that he was about a hundred yards from shore.

The elder of the fishermen, a bent man with a grizzled stubble and wearing coarse baggy trousers and a heavy sweater, showed his few broken teeth in a smile. "You live, *Effendim!* Allah is good! We found you in our net, you understand? We were hauling in the catch—" here he

made pulling motions—"and there you were, *Effendim!* The biggest fish of all!"

The young man laughed. "We were of a sureness that you were dead, *Effendim*. But I, Hakki, I gave to you the resuscitation which I have learned of the Red Cross while Ahmed here pulled on your tongue. And, as the old one says, at first we thought you were dead! Allah is indeed good!"

Nick got to his feet. "I also thought I was dead," he told them. He stared across the hundred yards separating him from the shore. A tall building of towers and turrets and ramparts overhung the Bosphorus. That, he thought, must be the sanitarium of the good Dr. Six! They would be searching for him, no doubt, but not with too much zeal. Dr. Six probably imagined him dead by now, being swept along the narrow throat of the Bosphorus to the Sea of Marmara.

Nick pointed to the tall building looming on the shore. Behind it he could see a busy arterial road, a constant passing flash of car lights.

"Lazim?"

The old man nodded. "*Evet*. A hospital. A clinic for the poor. Very fine man, the *Effendim* who runs it. Much for the poor!"

Sure, thought Nick grimly. Sure—Dr. Florence Nightingale Six!

He became aware that the two fishermen were regarding him strangely. They probably thought he was some kind of a nut! Escaped from the sanitarium. A psycho or an addict of some sort, or an alcoholic. Nick grinned tightly. Time to go. Back to the attack. Now would be a splendid time to catch Dr. Six and his staff off guard.

"*Cok tesekkur ederim*," he told the men. "I will return and give you much *backsheesh*. That is a promise. *Allahu ismarladik!*"

Nick went off the *daghlian* in a racing dive, landing flat and going into a superb crawl. The water was black and cold. He churned toward the lights of the sanitarium.

"Goodbye," said the two amazed fishermen. They stared after the crazy *Effendim*. They stared at each other. Hakki put his finger to his temple and twirled it. The *Effendim* was indeed nuts! Was he not returning to the

sanitarium. where undoubtedly he would be welcomed back and cared for? He shrugged. *Inshallah!* He picked up a net. "Come, old one! There is still a living to make! I doubt we will ever see *backsheesh* from that one!"

The old man nodded in agreement. "*Evet*. You are right. Allah has stricken that one! He is of a type who thinks he owns the Blue Mosque, no doubt! Let us work!"

As Nick approached the sanitarium he slackened his pace and trod water, his head barely above water. No doubt Dr. Six would have his husky attendants out, making a cursory search, but that was not the AXE man's immediate concern. He was looking for a way back into the place. There was a little unfinished business!

He found an iron-barred water gate barricading a narrow channel leading in under the building. The gate was chained and padlocked. No longer used, thought Nick. In the old days some rich Turk would have used it to make trips to Istanbul by boat, leaving and returning by way of his own basement. Most convenient.

And most convenient now. Nick was over the iron gate in a minute and walking toward a black arch that led into the lower parts of the sanitarium. He could walk now on the muddy bottom—the water was only chest high. As he was about to enter the gloom of the arch he heard voices and footsteps and stopped to submerge to his ears. Not a ripple stirred as he waited and watched and listened.

There were two of them. Big men in white trousers and jackets. Dr. Six's muscle boys. One of them was playing a flashlight carelessly about the gardens bordering the channel.

"This is all a lot of nonsense," said one of the men. "If the poor fool fell into the Bosphorus he is gone by now. That current is strong—his body is in the Sea of Marmara by now. We could be in our quarters drinking *raki*—"

The other man grunted. "*The raki will keep.*" He chuckled. "So will the American *Efendim*, in the cold water. Until the fishes are through with him. I agree that this is foolishness, but it is what the doctor ordered, *isn't*?" And he laughed at his own little joke.

"Yok." said the other attendant in a surly tone. "I have the bad cold as it is. I need *raki*! Let us go."

"A minute," agreed the other. He flashed the light out over the narrow, black strip of water where Nick was hiding. Nick slid quietly under the surface. He had expected this, was prepared for it. He could stay under for nearly four minutes if he must. No sweat there.

He kept his eyes open under water, saw the filtered white flash of the light as it traversed the surface over him. Then it was gone. Nick waited a full two minutes before he came up again. The attendants were gone. Now for it! Nick waded in under the black archway to the landing stage he knew must be there. The channel would lead him into the very guts of the building!

Ten minutes later N3 was on a second floor balcony peering into a long room. Heavy velvet hangings had not been drawn across the French windows and he could see clearly. He watched Dr. Joseph Six and the three men with him in the room. They were grouped around a table examining something with great interest.

N3 allowed himself a grim smile. They were examining *their own* death! As he watched them the plan sprang full born into his brain. They were examining his weapons, which the Syndicate man in the plane had been thoughtful enough to bring back from the battlefield beside the Kardu River.

So ironic, as Dr. Six himself might have put it! He thought himself quite safe. The Greek islands must seem very near. He planned to enjoy his retirement and his money, did the good Dr. Six.

Outside the French windows N3, clad only in cruddy and bedraggled shorts, his lean body not of concrete after all, for it was slowly leaking blood from a dozen punctures in the tanned hide, bided his time and waited his moment. He was running on his last reserves of strength now and he knew it. But he would last long enough—long enough to kill the vulture faced man in there. The man who now was toying with Pierre, the gas pellet, turning it over in his long surgeon's hands.

The gas bomb puzzled them. Nick saw them pass it around and exchange comments. It came back to Dr. Six and he examined it again with a magnifying glass, his high

brow wrinkled in thought. The Luger and the stiletto lay on the table at his elbow, but he paid them no attention. They held no secrets. It was the gas bomb, Pierre, that held their interest. Dr. Six handled it gingerly. He was cautious. The little round pellet was an unknown quality. Possibly, thought Nick, the doctor was remembering a certain atomic explosion that had taken place beside the Kardu?

It was time! While the pellet was in full view on the table. The doctor had just put it there and was talking now and pointing to the little gas bomb.

Nick Carter put on an expression of utmost anguish. He crashed through the French doors into the long room. The four men at the table turned in shocked surprise. They stared.

Nick staggered toward the table. "Hel—me—I—so sick! I—I dying! You please—help me!" He fell to his knees, his face contorted as if in great pain. He extended his arms to Dr. Six. "H—help me!"

Dr. Six was the first to recover his wits. He rose and came toward Nick, a pleased expression on his narrow blade-like face. "My poor man," he said. His tone was soft, nearly tender. "My poor fellow—so you've come back. How clever of you! We were worried, very worried. But it's all right now—certainly we'll help you."

He assisted Nick to stand, supporting the swaying AXE man. Nick pretended to be about to vomit. One of the other men said sharply, "Get him out of here! He'll ruin the rugs."

"Now—now," said Dr. Six. "Is that any way to talk about a poor sick man? But you are right—he must go to his bed at once. He is very ill—very ill!"

Nick clung to the doctor. "T—thank you," he gasped. "I—I appreciate! I—ohhhh—so sick!" He broke away from Dr. Six and lurched toward the table. The three men still seated there drew away in alarm. Nick fell over the table. As he did so he scooped up the little gas pellet. He twisted the dial control and dropped it on the floor in the same flashing and indetectable movement. He held his breath. He could not breathe again in this room!

Dr. Joseph Six had not survived so long by being a fool. He alone sensed danger. His vulture's face twisted in

alarm and he moved swiftly toward the door. "I'll get one of the attendants," he said crisply. "*Ja-we* must put this poor man to bed. I think—"

The other three men were already dying. The doctor sprinted for the door. N3 went after him in a long diving tackle. He brought him down just short of the door. By now the deadly fumes were filling the room. Nick sat on the writhing Dr. Six. "Your turn now," he told the man, careful not to inhale, pushing the words out with little exhalations. "Your turn now, Dr. Six! Remind you of the gas chambers? But I'll tell you a secret—don't breathe and you'll be all right!"

The emaciated man was powerless against N3's strength. He kicked and clawed and held his breath. His feet, in shiny patent leather shoes, beat a tattoo on the rug. Nick sat on him and watched calmly.

Dr. Joseph Six held his breath as long as he could. He slowly turned purple with the effort. A minute passed—then the doctor could stand it no longer. He took his last breath! He stiffened and his face contorted and the scrawny body arched under Nick. He died.

"*Inshallah*," said Nick softly. "Allah—and Pierre!"

He left the body and went back to the table. One of the men had fallen to the floor, the other two were dead in their chairs. Nick picked up his Luger, empty now, and the little stiletto. It had been a long time and his own lungs were beginning to pain him. Still a minute or a little less. Time enough.

Nick surveyed the three dead men for size. It would have to be one of them. The doctor's clothes would never fit him.

He selected a man and dragged the body toward the door. It was, his lungs told him urgently, time to get out of there! Now!

Nick opened the door and peered out into a dark corridor. A single dim bulb shone near a staircase leading up and down. He dragged the body into the hall and closed the door. He breathed again! Sweet indeed.

Rapidly he stripped the dead man. The suit was of wool, heavy and hot, and it did not exactly fit Nick's great muscles, but it would do. The shirt was white, soiled now and sweaty from the dead man, but N3 put it on. He tied

the dark knit tie, leaving the collar of the shirt unbuttoned so he wouldn't strangle. The shoes were impossible. Nick sighed and shrugged—he was a fairly well dressed man. With bare feet! So who needed shoes? He wasn't, after all, planning to walk back to Istanbul. He had a mass of Turkish money taken from the corpse—pounds, lira and *kurush*, small change, and surely he could get a taxi or rent a car somewhere. He thought he knew approximately where he was. On the Bosphorus about ten miles north-east of Istanbul. He remembered the cars he had seen flashing along the main road behind the sanitarium. Maybe he could hitch a ride into Istanbul. All he had to do now was get out of this place!

N3 did not feel quite chipper enough to whistle as he went down the dark spiral staircase. He had pushed the body back into the room and locked the door from the outside. The key was in his pocket. It might be hours before the attendants sensed anything wrong.

Nick had the little stiletto in his left hand, the reversed Luger as a club in his right—just in case. He could hear voices and the occasional slam of a door in the dim recesses of the huge mansion, but he saw nobody. There was a phone in the foyer, and for a moment he grinned and was tempted to call a taxi then and there, but decided not to tempt Fate too far. He went out a huge arched door of time stained walnut and down a long walk to double iron gates. They opened directly on the highway. A little sports car whizzed by as Nick walked out of the gates.

He stood for a moment on the blacktop, getting his bearings. To his right glittered the cheerful lights of what must be the Hotel Lido. That way back to Istanbul. To his left would be—this road must be the *Muallim Naci*—to his left would be *Sarıyer* and on beyond would be *Rumeli Feneri* and the lighthouse where the Bosphorus became the Black Sea. He did not want to go that way! He turned to his right and began to walk. Fast. Wanting to put as much distance between himself and the sanitarium as possible. He was not home safe yet by a long shot. The Syndicate, and now the Chinese, had infinite resources. As he had good reason to know.

In any case his job wasn't over yet—there was still

Johnny Ruthless! Three down—one to go. But first he needed sleep and food. Rest. His hurts tended. N3 was not of ordinary mortal flesh—or so his enemies swore—but even iron will bend at last.

There was little traffic now. Nick cursed under his breath. Earlier there had been a steady flow of cars. Now—nothing. He trudged on, loosening the choking tie at his throat.

Nick paused to light one of the dead man's cigarettes. He heard the car then, coming from behind him, from the direction of the sanitarium he had just left. It was a high powered job and it was closing in fast, its headlights great glaring eyes in the night. Nick decided to chance it. He stepped into the road and began to use his thumb in the time-honored signal of the hitch-hiker.

The big car roared down the road at him. The lights pinioned him against the night like a bug on cork, and held him revealed in stark brilliance.

Nick kept signaling with his thumb. The car did not slow. The fiery eyes glowered at him. Very close now. Not slowing. Then Nick cursed and dove for the ditch along the road. Damn fool! Either drunk or—or deliberately trying to kill him? Maybe it hadn't been so smart to signal.

The car missed him by a foot or less. Nick, even as he dove for the ditch, had a fleeting confused image of the driver wrenching at the wheel. The car screamed into a long skid, tires burning and squealing and smoking as the driver fought the wheel.

N3 lay in the ditch and turned the air blue. He had the Luger and the stiletto ready just in case this was new trouble from the sanitarium. He waited, lying quietly, waiting to see what would happen.

The car came to a stop half off the road on the far side. It backed, turned and the lights crept back toward Nick, shafting over the spot where he lay in the ditch. The car stopped. A door slammed. A *tock-tock* of heels came along the blacktop. High heels. A woman!

Nick Carter got to his knees. He peered into the brilliance of the lancing headlights as the girl came into them. She was a redhead. She was carrying a bottle of whisky in

one hand and staggering a little as she *tick-tocked* along on stilt heels.

She had the best pair of legs Nick had ever seen in his life. They were long and slim and curved and magnificent in black stockings. Her skirt was very short. Nick, from his kneeling coign in the ditch, could see well up her skirt to the band of darker stocking, a flash of garter tab, the swell of a white inner thigh over that.

The girl paused at the edge of the ditch and peered down at Nick. She was wearing a loose, thin frock of some light material. As she bent over Nick could see clearly the firm white pears of her breasts. No hint of a bra! The white pears jiggled tantalizingly not six feet away.

The girl swayed. Nick saw that she was very drunk. Her eyes—green? Her eyes were a bit glassy in the glare of the headlights.

"Hey," called the girl. "Hey, you down there! You all right, honey? I'm sorry—I didn't even see you till the last minute. You hurt, honey?"

The voice and accent were pure American! Middle-West American. Strange, Nick thought as he climbed out of the ditch. Strange, but not too strange. There were a lot of Americans around Istanbul these days.

"I'm okay," he said as he came up beside her. "You shouldn't be driving in that condition, though. You damned near got me."

The girl pouted. Her mouth was delectable, her lips moist and red. She swayed and clung to him. "I say I sorry, honey. Didn't mean hurt you. Say—whyn't we have a drink and you can forgive me, huh?"

Nick took the bottle from her. A drink was very much in order at the moment. He drank deeply—it was scotch—and handed the bottle back to her. "I forgive you," he said. "I'll forgive you even more if you can drive me into Istanbul. I've got to get there. It's very important."

It was, too! Hawk would be blowing his stack, waiting to hear from his Number One boy!

The girl swayed against him. Her delicate perfume teased Nick's nostrils. In spite of his absolutely beatup condition he felt a tinge of interest, of desire, and had to

laugh at himself. What a beast he was! An animal! To even think about it at a time like this—but there it was!

Her unbound breasts were pressing against his chest now. She said, "I sorry, honey. Not going to Istanbul. Going home—live out at Plaj Beach. On Black Sea—nice villa there. Whyn't you come me?"

Nick was supporting her. She was clinging now, swaying and waving the whisky bottle back and forth.

"You were driving toward Stamboul," Nick said. "Or didn't you know that?"

"I was—driving to Istanbul?" The girl looked up at Nick. Her eyes were definitely green. Long and narrow and sultry eyes. Not quite so glassy now, he thought. Maybe she was sobering up a bit.

"I was going toward Istanbul?" She repeated. Suddenly she laughed. "Damn! How you like that. I thought I was going home! I've been at the Lido, drinking. Drowning my sorrows. Guess I took a wrong turn, huh?"

"I guess you did. So how about it—drive me into Istanbul? I'll pay you plenty."

The red pout again. "Money? I don't need money. I'm jaded, honey! Or my husband is—same thing, huh! He's not home tonight, though. That's good, huh?" The girl took a swig from the bottle. She made a face then smiled at Nick. Her teeth were white and even. "Whyn't come home with me, doll? We can have lots of fun, huh? You know—mice can play when cat's away." She took another drink and swayed into his arms again.

Why not? He could at least get a bath and something to eat and—well, he would let that work itself out! Nick had never cared much for married women—they were usually trouble.

"Have you got a phone at your place? I'll have to make a call."

The girl smiled and took his arm. "Sure we got a phone, darling. What you think we are—peasants? We're not. We're big shots. We got *two* phones. You can use them both if you want!"

Nick followed her back to the car. She slid behind the wheel. "We pointed right now? For the Black Sea?"

"You're pointed right," said Nick. "But maybe I'd better drive?"

"No. You're my guest. I'll drive."

She pulled her loose skirt high up on her thighs. "Can't drive in the damned thing," she explained. "Binds my legs. How you like my legs, honey. Good?"

Nick surveyed the revealed expanse of startlingly lovely leg. The skirt was nearly to her waist. He could see the black garter straps and a fringe of panty.

"You have lovely legs," he agreed.

The girl leaned to stare at him. Her tone softened, she did not seem drunk now. "You do look a little beat up, honey! Maybe I hurt you after all, huh? Maybe I better take you to a hospital—or to the police? We can always meet another time."

The police! A hospital! Neither held any fascination for Nick Carter. Especially the police.

"Nice of you to offer," he said. "But I'm all right. Drive on."

laugh at himself. What a beast he was! An animal! To even think about it at a time like this—but there it was!

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was impossible—he would remain here a few hours, then get into Istanbul, call Hawk, and go after Johnny Ruthless! Get it over with. Fast!

The door of the boudoir opened and Tessa Travis came in. She was still fully dressed, which surprised Nick a bit. He had expected she would slip into "something comfortable." Wasn't that the routine?

Tessa came to the bedside and bent to kiss him lightly. As her moist lips slid across Nick's he felt himself responding in spite of his utter weariness. Her perfume teased him, the sight of her breasts as she bent over him was aphrodisiacal. He sought to kiss one of those exciting pale pears, with its cherry tips, but to his surprise—and faint annoyance—Tessa backed away. She gave him an odd smile. She put her hands on her hips and writhed her pelvis at him in revolving motions.

"Not so fast, huh, doll? Let little Tessa set the pace? Okay?"

For a moment something moved in N3's brain. Was there something familiar about this girl? No—couldn't be. He had never seen her before in his life. He wouldn't have forgotten *this* one—because she was a definite kook! Some kind of a lovely nut! N3 sighed inwardly. It took all kinds. And she was exciting, even in his present state of mind and body.

Tessa had retreated to the center of the room. She flicked off the single light. For a moment, in the dark, she was a phantom figure, a perfumed redheaded ghost shimmering in the murk. Then the Feneri light came around in its broad sweep and Nick saw her. She was pulling her dress over her head. From the depths of the frock she said, with a little laugh, "I'm gonna do a strip for you, doll! You like that? I'll bet you don't know something about me—I used to *be* a stripper! In Chicago! That was a long time ago, before I met Joe. *He* don't even know it!"

"Your husband must be a very understanding man," said Nick. "Or maybe tolerant is the word I want?"

He saw the white shoulders in a shrug of dismissal. "I couldn't care less what Joe is, honey! We don't get along so good. But, we get by—he has his kicks and I have mine. Right now you're my kicks, doll!"

The light swept the room again. He saw her coming

Chapter 15

KOSK MANZARA

The *Kosk* was not so much a villa as a sort of minor league palace. It stood, a pink and cream stucco edifice, on a wooden eminence overlooking the Black Sea and a view of fantastic beauty. It had once been the summer home of Turkish royalty, or so said Tessa Travis, the girl who had brought Nick to the place. He had taken her word for that, along with everything else. It was very dark and he had not been able to see much of the road, or anything else, because she had driven like a fiend.

Now, his wounds bathed and anointed after a lovely tepid shower, he lay on a soft round bed, in a borrowed terry-cloth robe of her husband's, and wished he could go to sleep. Nick sighed. He wasn't going to get off that easy and he knew it. Tessa Travis—her husband was at the moment in Greece on business—had been very patient with him. She had sobered up with surprising speed, and had been quick to anticipate his every need. She was not with him at the moment, but she would be back. Oh, yes! Tessa had made it very clear that she expected a certain payment for her generous hospitality.

The phones were out of order. Both of them. Nick pondered that as he watched the stark white beam of the Feneri light sweep through the ornately furnished boudoir every minute, like the sweep hand on a gigantic watch. The beam passed over his stolen garments tossed carelessly on a chair.

Nick sipped at the scotch and water he was nursing, the glass cold on his flat belly, and dismissed the matter of the phones. Turkish phone service *was* lousy at times. He drew luxuriously on his cigarette—American—and stamped it out in an ashtray on the bed beside him. He wished again he could sleep—for days! Yet he knew it

tion that *he* was the girl, *she* the man! Tessa appeared to want it that way.

When she finally convulsed it was a minor atomic explosion. She screamed shrilly and fell away from Nick, kicking her long legs frantically and tearing at the red satin sheets. She clawed at his naked chest with her nails, inflicting new wounds on the old. Nick caught at her and held her until gradually she subsided, her sobs and moans fading at last to a shallow breathing. She said nothing, just lay quietly face down. He could see a great stain of saliva on the sheet beneath her wide open, still gasping mouth. After another minute or so the tremors stopped and she was quiet.

"Tessa?"

"Don't talk now," she said harshly. "Not now! Let me rest first!"

It was a different tone, a different woman who spoke. No trace of the lubricious Tessa. No trace of drunkenness, either.

N3 got up and went to the bathroom. It was huge, of dazzling pink tile with golden fixtures. Nick was impressed, but only for a moment. He got it almost instantly. The smell! Acetone! Nail polish remover!

For the next minute Nick Carter stood silent and unmoving, staring at his reflection in the big mirror. His face wore an expression of great self disgust. He was looking at a fool! A fool who deserved the death that was being now held in careful storage for him!

Noiselessly he opened the medicine cabinet and stood looking at the bottles of FASTACT. Nail polish remover for girls in a hurry. Made in Chicago. There were three bottles of the stuff.

Nick closed the medicine cabinet door, flushed the toilet—though he had not used it—and went back into the bedroom. Tessa was still on the bed, breathing softly, face buried in the pillow.

Nick turned on the overhead lights. This would have to be fast. He went toward the bed. The girl rolled over, squinting into the light. "No!" she complained. "No—turn off those damned lights, honey! Little Tessa wants to sleep—"

Nick smiled. A gentle, tender, friendly smile. He was

slowly toward the bed. She was wearing opaque black panties, a garter belt and long black stockings. She still wore the high stilt heels.

Tessa halted a few feet from the bed. Her voice was husky now. Nick sensed a terrific excitement building in her. An excitement that more than matched his own—that was, in some way he could not define, not a *normal* excitement! Tessa was an odd one, all right! A real kook!

The girl did a sudden bump and grind. She revolved her torso in a shuddering convulsion. She laughed. "You know something, doll? If I'd known about Turkish belly dancing back in old Chi I could have knocked them dead! But who knew from belly dancing then? I was strictly a bump and grind and take it off girl! I was good, though. Sometimes I wish I hadn't give up my career to marry Joel!"

She's crude, thought Nick. Crude and more than a little vulgar! She's also beautiful and exciting and, at the moment, terribly desirable. He felt the urge rise in him. He held out his arms. "Forget your husband, Tessa, and come here. If I'm going to put the horns on him, and I've a hunch I am, let's get started, shall we?"

"Don't be in such a hurry," she whispered. She came to kneel on the bed beside him. When Nick tried to move into the dominant position she said no and pushed him gently back. "You let little Tessa take charge," she whispered in his ear. "You just relax, honey bun. Little Tessa will do everything." Her tongue, warm and moist, moved around the inside of his ear.

It was practically a rape. With Nick playing the unaccustomed role of rapee. Tessa began to breath hard as she laved his entire body with moist red kisses. Their tongues fought a dozen battles in the caverns of their mouths. Tessa was sobbing and panting now, but when Nick tried to remove her scant attire she fought him off. He gave up. The panties, it seemed, were to stay on! He thought again that she was a real—kook seemed inadequate now—a real nut! Maybe she was a little mad! If so it was an exciting madness!

Tessa had amazing strength for a slim girl. She kept him supine while she clamped her mouth to his and assumed the dominant position. Nick had the odd sensa-

tion that *he* was the girl, *she* the man! Tessa appeared to want it that way.

When she finally convulsed it was a minor atomic explosion. She screamed shrilly and fell away from Nick, kicking her long legs frantically and tearing at the red satin sheets. She clawed at his naked chest with her nails, inflicting new wounds on the old. Nick caught at her and held her until gradually she subsided, her sobs and moans fading at last to a shallow breathing. She said nothing, just lay quietly face down. He could see a great stain of saliva on the sheet beneath her wide open, still gasping mouth. After another minute or so the tremors stopped and she was quiet.

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Nick smiled. A gentle, tender, friendly smile. He was

close to her, staring down into the lovely face, the narrowed green eyes. He said, "I think it's time for little Tessa to wake up."

Nick grabbed the red hair and pulled hard. The wig had been stuck on well and it came off with difficulty, but it came off.

The effect was startling! Those narrow green eyes, now blazing with shock and hate—and the sleek black hair in a man's style haircut!

Nick tossed the red wig to the floor. His face was set in grim planes. "Hello," he said in a cold voice. "Hello, Johnny Ruthless!"

Her reaction was nearly too fast even for Nick Carter. Her hand came from beneath the pillow like a bolt of lightning, clutching an old fashioned straight razor, the blade laid back across her knuckles in the manner of a true pro. She leaped at Nick, sweeping the killing edge around in a great semicircle designed to slash him from ear to ear!

N3's reaction was just a half-heart beat faster. He let her have it with a short jolting right hand on the point of the chin! The razor flew from her hand and she turned, stunned and with glassy eyes, and slid off the bed to the floor. Out cold.

Nick picked up that lovely soft body, slim enough to play the man so well—when the good breasts were strapped down—and tossed it back on the bed. The red mouth was open and she was making hoarse snoring sounds. A little saliva dribbled from the corner of her mouth. Nick ripped off her garter belt and bound her hands behind her. He peeled off both stockings and tied her ankles with them. He did it roughly. He was livid now, sweating and pale and full of a terrible anger directed in equal parts at the girl and himself. He hated stupidity, especially in himself—and he had been stupid! It had been there to see all along! Marion Talbot, who had vanished so completely at the *Cinema Bleu*! She *had* gone up that rope ladder—as Johnny Ruthless! After changing clothes and washing the nail polish off her nails! As a woman she had liked to wear nail polish—as Johnny Ruthless she couldn't! But FASTACT took care of that. One minute and the nails came clean! And left the smell behind.

When he had her securely tied he made a fast search of the villa. He did it expertly and professionally and speedily. When he came back to the bedroom the girl was just opening her eyes. They hated him with a fierce burning intensity. Nick sat down on the bed beside her. He had gotten into his stolen trousers. Now he threw the terry cloth robe over her naked breasts. He lit a cigarette and stuck it in the petulant mouth. He said: "You want to tell me all about it, Johnny? Marion Talbot? Tessa? Which is the real you, anyway?"

"Why should I tell you anything, Carter?" She stared at him in sullen defiance. "You're going to kill me anyway—the same as you did Maurice and Carlos and the doctor! Not that I feel sorry for them—they deserved it, the fools! I told them to let me handle you—my way!"

Nick smiled coldly. "I do owe the late doctor something, I suppose. You were going to cut my throat at the sanitarium?"

"Yes! But that fool wouldn't let me! He was an old woman—always worrying about his precious skin. I should have cut *his* throat!"

Nick shrugged. "What matter? He's dead now. The point is that they're all three dead—but you're still alive! You might be able to stay that way, at least for a time. If you talk. I promise I won't kill you. I'll be disobeying my orders—but I'll take that chance. I'll turn you over to the Turks—you'll face a murder charge for killing Leslie Standish, at least! I imagine you've killed a lot of people, but one charge will hang you. They *do* hang over here, don't they?"

The girl nodded absently. Nick could see a glint of hope in the green eyes, could read her thinking. Time! She would be gaining a little time. Maybe the Turks would hang her—and maybe they wouldn't! It was better than what she faced now. So she was thinking and so Nick wanted her to think.

She glanced at him sharply, shifting on the bed and straining at the garter belt which bound her hands. The terry cloth robe fell away from her splendid breasts and Nick replaced it. She was still wearing the high stilt heels and it occurred to him that she had never taken them off, not even when making love. Kook! A deadly murderous

kook! He had known some weirdo women, but this one was the prize.

"You promise you won't kill me?" It was a demand. She was getting her guts back, he thought. Our little razor expert isn't so scared now.

"I promise *I* won't kill you," Nick said. "That's all I promise. I'll turn you over to the Turks and you'll stand trial for murder. I think they'll hang you—the Turks aren't very sentimental about beautiful girls who commit murder. I *hope* they hang you! But if you play ball with me at least you'll have a few more weeks of life. Trials take time. Well?"

"All right." Sullenly. "I'll do it. What do you want to know?"

Nick lit another cigarette for them both. He moved her, not too roughly, and searched the bed thoroughly. No more razors concealed in the pillows. Nothing. He took the garter belt from her wrists and left her hands free. He kept the stockings bound around her ankles.

"To save time," he said, "I'll tell you what I already . . . I've been through the house. Found some very interesting things, too."

The girl relaxed. She smoked and stared at him with narrow green eyes, a little smile on her red lips. The terry cloth robe fell away from her breasts. She appeared not to notice it.

"You can skip the sex gambit," Nick told her harshly. "I've had that bit."

The girl stuck out her red tongue at him. "You loved it, too," she purred. "So did I. It's a lot more kicks that way—when you know you're going to kill the man after!"

Nick could remember reading of a scorpion, female, which had the habit of making love and then stinging the male to death. Here was a sick and twisted mind in a beautiful body. He sighed and got up. He took the straight razor from his pocket and opened it and bent the blade back across his knuckles. He grabbed her hard, brutally, and shoved her head back on the pillow. He stroked the razor softly across the white throat and stared down into her eyes. There was fear in the green depths now.

"I've been known to break promises," Nick said very

softly. "Now cut out the monkey business! Cut out the sex bit! Talk—nothing but talk! You get it?"

She got it. Nick put the razor away and said, "I found your getup, you know. The dinner jacket, the false moustache, the black contact lenses. Everything. I found the radio setup on the third floor—the receiver and transmitter. You're the real Red agent, aren't you? You're the one who set up the deal for the Chinese to take over the smuggling apparatus?"

She nodded. "Yes. I've been a Red agent for years. Even back in Chicago. First I was Soviet, then when they got soft I switched. The Chinese have the right idea—so had Stalin!"

"Too bad you won't be around to see Stalin's comeback," said Nick. "But let's get on. You're really Marion Talbot, aren't you? From St. Louis?"

She nodded. "Yes. My parents and my brother are ashamed of me—I ran away to Chicago and went into show business! I really was a stripper, you know. I was a B girl, too, and, oh, a lot of things!"

"Is that where you met the Basque and married him—in Chicago?"

There was a definite fear in her eyes now. "You're a devil," she hissed. A devil! They—everyone—said you were! Yes, I met Carlos in Chicago. He was fighting there and I was silly enough to think I was in love with him. I was only a dumb kid! We didn't live together very long—he left me and I didn't hear from him for a long time. Then he wrote and asked me to come to Istanbul."

Nick said: "By that time you had been recruited? You were working for the Reds?"

"Yes. There was a bunch of pinks around the University—the University of Chicago. I got in with them, but they were all talk and no action!"

Nick said he understood. "You wanted action? So you came here and got in on the dope smuggling deal and finally took it over for the Reds?"

She nodded. "About that. None of the others wanted to sell out. Not at first. I made them."

"I'll bet you did. You were really Defarge's secretary, part of the time?"

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"I'll bet you did. You were really Defarge's secretary, part of the time?"

"Yes. I was three people. Marion Talbot, Tessa Travis and—and Johnny Ruthless. It was pretty easy."

Nick agreed that it must have been easy. "Three people. Two wigs and your own hair, eh? Blonde wig—Marion Talbot. Red wig—Tessa Travis. Your own hair, and the contacts and the dinner jacket and your breasts strapped down and you were Johnny Ruthless! How did you work it—all those killings? Get close to them as a woman—then kill them as a man?"

Something cunning moved in the green eyes. She licked at her lips with a pointed red tongue. "Mostly. That was easy, too. Most men are suckers for a woman."

Nick hesitated for a moment. The next words came hard, but finally he got them out. "I suppose Charles Morgan, Mousy, was easy, too?"

The girl laughed in contempt. "Like rolling off a log. He used to go down on his knees and beg for it. I used to give it to him, too, sometimes. Just enough to keep him stringing along. He was hooked, you know. I guess you do—you seem to know everything else, damn you! But he as—one of your very own AXE slob! Using dope! at made it even easier for me—for us."

"I know," said Nick. Hate was burning cold in him. "They did a PM on Mousy and found the needle tracks. You killed him that night, didn't you?"

"Yes. I had to! He was going to pieces. We couldn't trust him anymore. He was a poor little milksop, anyway, all full of conscience! He needed a fix so bad that night at the *Cinema Bleu* that he was shaking!"

"Yes," said Nick. "I know. I thought it was just nerves. That he was cracking up from the strain. He called you, didn't he? While you were in Leslie Standish's office? He called you and warned you about me, and told you where he car was. You killed Standish—she'd been a double—but you didn't trust her any longer. You killed her, changed clothes and became Johnny Ruthless! You went to where the Opel was parked, where poor Mousy was waiting for his fix. You killed him and then came back to get me at the *Cinema*. That went wrong, so you set up the ambush at the car. That went wrong, too."

The red mouth worked. A filthy stream of obscenities poured from those lips Nick had so recently kissed. "Ev-

everything went wrong," she spat. "Everything went wrong as soon as you showed up, you—you AXE bastard!"

Nick nodded. "You had bad luck," he said calmly. "You nearly got me that morning in the Horn, with the cruiser. I suppose Mousy told you an AXE man was coming in?"

The girl scowled. "Yes. But he didn't know who it was. He was to go overboard just as the cruiser made the hit! We were really after the Todhunter fellow—he was getting too close to us, getting mean."

"You cut his brother's throat, right?"

She nodded sulkily. "I'm tired of talking. If you're going to take me in—do it! And I want a lawyer!"

Nick laughed harshly. "You think the Chinese will help you now?"

She turned sly. "I'll be all right. I've got friends."

Nick stood up. "We'll see. It'll be out of my hands—oh, one or two more. Just who knew you were Johnny Ruthless? Did Mousy?"

"That little fool! He knew me only as Marion Talbot. He—he even asked me to marry him once. I nearly died trying not to laugh. I had to come out here to the villa and lay low for a week—I couldn't trust myself not to laugh in his face."

"I'll bet. Did Defarge or Dr. Six know you as Johnny Ruthless? Did your husband? The Basque?"

"Only Defarge." Sullen again now. "He was the only one who knew I was Johnny. I used to have to use his place to change. The bathroom, you know. Defarge was the only one I could trust with that knowledge. He was an old man, and dying. Anyway he was afraid of me, too!"

"I don't blame him," said Nick. "I'm a little afraid of you myself!"

He untied the stockings binding her ankles. "All right! Let's go into Istanbul. No tricks or I'll kill you. And I never meant anything more in my life."

The girl massaged her legs and reached for her feet. "I've got to take off these stilt heels. They're killing me." She reached, her breasts falling away from her slim rib cage in firm perfection. "How could little me play tricks

on a big AXE man like you," she said. She took off one of her shoes and twisted at the heel.

She was cat fast. The heel turned and came away from the shoe and she lunged at Nick with the little stiletto concealed in the leather. She jammed it at his heart, rapier fashion, her red mouth twisted in a grimace of hate and fury. He felt the instant scalding pain as the little blade ripped along a rib.

He grabbed at her, trying to pinion the hand holding the stiletto. She fought like a demon, cursing him, her spittle wetting his face. She twisted away, falling under him the blade still in her hand. His whole two hundred pounds fell on her. He felt her convulse—no sexual convulsion this—and arch her back and try to scream. The words and sounds died in her throat. She went limp beneath him.

Nick turned her over. The stiletto was in her left breast, dangling there, the five inch leather stilt heel decorating the reddening flesh like some grotesque medal. Nick lifted an eyelid and looked into the green eye. Glass now—forever.

He called Hawk from the Hole in Stamboul. He had driven in in the Mercedes and left it for the police to find. The two Ankara men were still in charge in the Hole, and the old Albanian, Bici, was as dirty and as silent as ever. And as drunk on *raki*. Nick had a couple of swigs before he called Hawk on the scrambler.

His chief, for once, heard him entirely through without interruption. When he had finished Hawk said, "I've been worried, son. This has been a rough one, eh?"

"Rough enough," said N3. "I'll expect a couple of weeks leave when I get back, sir. I've got a little forgetting to do."

"I hear you're pretty beat up," Hawk said. "I think a week in a hospital would be good for you."

"I don't," said Nick. "No hospital! I'll heal on my own time, sir. In bed, maybe, but not in a hospital!"

"Have it your way," agreed Hawk. "About Mousy, now? How far are we compromised?"

"Not too bad." N3 was grim. "They're all dead! Anyway Mousy didn't tell them about the Hole—he was

getting pretty scared by that time, really scared, and he was running from them! He forgot he would need a fix so badly—and with me around he couldn't get it! I watched him go to pieces right under my eyes, but I didn't guess why. But forget Mousy—I have. Let the little guy sleep in whatever peace he's found."

A long pause. Then Hawk said, "My idea exactly. Only you and I know about Mousy now, N3. Let's keep it that way."

"Right, sir. It's over. Now when do I get out of Istanbul?"

"Today sometime. I'll have Ankara set it up. You should be in Washington tomorrow early. I'll want to see you right away, of course."

"Of course."

"As a matter of fact," said his boss, "something else has come up that is right in your line. But I'll explain when I see you. In the meantime, as you say, there is rest and—recreation! I'm sure you'll find something, and someone, who will take the bad taste of this one out of your mouth."

Nick Carter did not answer for a moment. Then a wry little smile tickled the corner of his firm mouth.

"*Inshallah*," said Nick Carter.

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